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Selling College: Student Recruitment and Education Reform Rhetoric in the Age of Privatization

Paige Marie Hermansen
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

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Selling College:
Student Recruitment and Education Reform Rhetoric in the Age of Privatization

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in English

by

Paige Hermansen
University of Texas at Austin
Bachelor of Arts in English, 2006
Western Washington University
Master of Arts in English, 2009

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University of Arkansas

This dissertation is approved for recommendation for the Graduate Council.

Dr. Elías Domínguez Barajas
Dissertation Director

Dr. Sean Connors
Committee Member

Dr. David Jolliffe
Committee Member

Abstract

This dissertation explores the success of for-profit colleges and universities (FPCUs) as a socio-cultural phenomenon that hinges on distinct public discursive strains and neoliberal rhetorics. This project examines the role of language in creating and sustaining particular discourses of higher education and how those discourses are reinforced and reflected in channels of discourse like documentary films and advertisements.

In the context of shifting demands on and representations of higher education, this project critiques the evolving rhetoric of American education and the shift toward a wider acceptance of privatization efforts, as well as the effect this shift has had on prospective and current college students. Through a rhetorical analysis of for-profit college advertisements, as well as interviews with current and former students, this project explores the impact of promotional discourses on students who commit to such institutions. Among other modes, advertisements for colleges and documentary films about education have filtered a politically motivated narrative to the public that hinges on two related assumptions: that public education is a fundamentally flawed—if not failed—system which can only be remedied with market-based initiatives, and that preparing students for productive participation in the workforce is the primary goal of schooling.

As illustrated by the texts presented in this project—interviews with current and former FPCU students and analyses of public discourses—that narrative has shaped the way that the public “makes sense” of education and supports particular education policies. Further, this paradigm has bled into the world of higher education and prompted colleges and universities to articulate themselves to the public as both idealized, nostalgic havens of the collegiate ideal and practical, economic, and utilitarian spaces to prepare students for the job market, which has influenced the attitudes and expectations of prospective and current college students.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my father, Tom Hermansen. I did it, Pops.
You always said I would. I only wish you were here to celebrate with me.

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Introduction

Language, Ideology, and Higher Education: The Case of For-Profit Colleges

In the 2014 documentary film *Ivory Tower*, which investigates the rising costs of higher education and the looming student debt crisis, Dr. Drew Faust, the President of Harvard University, describes what she believes to be the ideal undergraduate education:

We at Harvard believe that the best kind of education for undergraduates is a liberal arts education. And that means a broad education across the fields of human inquiry. We aren't educating students for a first job. We want to give them the abilities to think and reason and question for a lifetime. (Rossi, 2014)

By expressing support for the idea that colleges and universities should act as spaces for fostering critical thinking and citizenship instead of serving as career training sites, Faust joins a chorus of university administrators, scholars, and activists who, in recent texts, extol that particular ideal, including Andrew Delbanco (*College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be*, 2012) and Fareed Zakaria (*In Defense of a Liberal Education*, 2015). This ideal represents one of two competing discourses of higher learning; the other, which many colleges and universities espouse, frames higher education as an economic commodity that students should pursue at any cost, since college is a failsafe pathway to a lucrative career.

The latter paradigm, in which colleges and universities use rhetorics of pragmatism to present themselves as spaces that primarily serve the function of preparing students for jobs and sustaining the country's economy by training its workforce, dominates contemporary public discourse about higher education. The expectation that colleges and universities must be economically productive spaces is not unique to higher education; instead, a network of political, economic, and social factors have created a results-driven, accountability-centered culture that has drastically shifted the function that the public expects schools to serve at all levels of education.

In the realm of higher education, this paradigm of education puts unprecedented pressure on public colleges and universities, which operate under limited state funding, to increase job placement numbers and emphasize vocational skills and training. In a 2013 interview, Republican Governor Pat McCrory of North Carolina made statements that illustrate the potential consequences of this ideology:

I think some of the educational elite have taken over our education where we are offering courses that have no chance of getting people jobs. [Gender studies], that's a subsidized course, and frankly, if you want to take gender studies, that's fine. Go to a private school and take it, but I don't want to subsidize that if that's not going to get someone a job. It's the tech jobs that we need right now. (McCrory, 2013)

Though McCrory's comments were met with resounding criticism from his political opponents, his view is consistent with prevailing public attitudes about higher education. In order to survive, colleges and universities must demonstrate their economic and social value. Ensuring that more students are academically prepared for college has long been the goal of K-12 education reform; as the "final rung" in the academic ladder, colleges and universities are bound to the same standards of productivity, efficiency, and the ability to meet measurable criteria of student success and economic utility that federal programs like President Obama's 2009 Race to the Top initiative are expected to uphold at the K-12 level. Thus, in their advertisements, mission statements, and other channels of public discourse, institutions of higher education present themselves to the public as both idealized, nostalgic havens of the collegiate ideal and practical, utilitarian spaces that offer "marketable" curricula and prepare students for the job market.

Nowhere is the promotion of this paradigm more evident than in the discourse of for-profit colleges and universities (FPCUs) like the University of Phoenix, DeVry University, and Kaplan University. Within the broad category of higher education, FPCUs—market-oriented, business-modeled institutions that proliferated during the 1990s—are under more pressure than

traditional colleges and universities to use persuasive strategies to establish their public identities and recruit students, and they do so more widely and aggressively than other types of institutions. Though a record number of FPCUs have buckled under financial and legal pressure in recent years, they remain powerful players in the marketplace of higher education. They are often ridiculed and dismissed by higher education administrators, politicians, and employers alike, but FPCUs continue to recruit students, largely through their promotional discourse and the persuasive strategies of their enrollment counselors. Because they explicitly endorse a results-oriented, marketable college education, FPCUs are ideal sites for an analysis of the role of language in the promulgation of the prevailing ideologies of the role and function of higher education.

By viewing the promotional discourse of FPCUs and other texts that reflect and enact education reform ideology through the lens of discourse analysis, this project investigates the mechanisms by which the current reality of higher education as a social institution is “expressed, constituted, and legitimized by language” (Wodak, 2006, p. 53). In this project, I trace the relationship between texts intended to promote K-12 education reform and the prevailing strains of public discourse about higher education. I argue that language plays a powerful, constitutive role in the creation and diffusion of two interrelated and widely accepted beliefs about education: 1) that American colleges and universities should primarily serve the economic function of preparing students for careers, and 2) that privatization, competition, and corporatization are necessary for educational institutions of all levels to thrive. The ideology underlying these two phenomena holds that educational institutions are beholden to the private sphere’s demand for employable graduates and should mimic corporations by prioritizing profit, outcome, and efficiency over any other principles.

Historically, there has been a complex relationship between higher education and the national economy in the United States. While the earliest American colleges and universities, such as Harvard and Yale, were founded as theological institutions to prepare young men for the ministry, a number of factors in the 19th century—including growing public hostility toward religion, advancements in scientific knowledge, and the expansion of the industrial and agricultural sectors of the economy—prompted a shift in the function higher education was expected to serve. The Morrill Act of 1862, which provided grants of land to states to allow for the creation of colleges and universities, was passed in order to “promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life.” Rudolph (1962) describes the changing focus of higher education after the Morrill Act was passed: “Vocational and technical education had become a legitimate function of American higher education, and everywhere the idea of going to college was being liberated from the class-bound, classical-bound traditions which for so long had defined the American collegiate experience” (263).

By 1955, land-grant colleges—which embraced the German-university ideals of technical and practical research—enrolled over 20% of all American college students (Rudolph, 1962, p. 244). The 1920s, however, ushered in an era of a “new respect for the concept of education as... a passport to human understanding” and “a revolt against the impersonalization [and] the machinelike quality of the university-oriented education” (Rudolph, 1962, p. 457). This time period, according to Rudolph (1962), saw the emergence of an “American consensus” on the purpose higher education should serve—as a site for training the American workforce and developing an educated populace capable of informed participation in a democracy. Most education historians, however, would argue that such a consensus was ever reached. As a social institution, higher education has continuously oscillated between the call to address the practical

and the theoretical, depending upon the country's ideological and economic climate. The 1980s, however, marked a dramatic shift and the formation of a framework that idealizes private competition and corporatization over any democratic purpose education might serve. Within this framework, which first gained broad public appeal during the Reagan administration, educational institutions are expected to absorb the values and expectations of the free market, which is reflected in the public discourse of these institutions. Such an ideology fosters student expectations that education's primary goal is the economic advancement of the individual.

Further, this project addresses the consequences of those expectations: Economically disadvantaged, socially marginalized students incur significant financial risk by accepting the argument that a college education is a failsafe vehicle to a successful career. Though the long-term economic value of a quality education and a college degree are indisputable—college graduates earn, on average, twice as much during their lifetimes than individuals without college degrees (“What Is a College Education Worth?”, Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2010)—the majority of students recruited by FPCUs are academically unprepared for college and, thus, are less likely to graduate and more likely to incur student loan debt that they will struggle to repay. At the height of their success, for-profit colleges incentivized enrolling underprepared students, which encouraged recruiters to engage in deceptive and misleading recruitment tactics. Recruiters at many FPCUs knowingly misinformed students about the cost and duration of academic programs and their chances of finding a job in their desired field post-graduation. Most significantly, however, recruiters downplayed the risks of accruing federal student aid debt and, in many cases, assured prospective students that the salary they would earn after graduation would easily allow them to repay that debt.

FPCUs are not the only institutions that use marketing strategies to appeal to potentially underprepared prospective students, thus encouraging those students to incur financial risk when they enroll. Encouraged by the competition presented by private institutions and FPCUs, public colleges and universities contend with other institutions when recruiting students, a phenomenon that has escalated in recent years. Bok (2013) identifies the “intensity with which institutions compete with one another”—which he attributes to “the presence of private colleges and universities that vie with one another and with public institutions”—as one of the distinguishing characteristics of the American higher education system (pp. 18-19).

A recent phenomenon among many institutions in the not-for-profit sector of higher education echoes the capitalist ethos of FPCUs and presents similar risks to financially disadvantaged, academically underprepared students. Traditional colleges and universities have responded to competitive market conditions by building lavish facilities to attract students. This “country club campus” phenomenon has created an arms race among colleges and universities to construct luxurious on-campus housing facilities and offer amenities such as tanning beds¹ and resort-style swimming pools. Public universities often invest in such projects in order to recruit out-of-state students who pay significantly higher tuition and fees; frequently, they also do so merely to “keep up” with competing universities. James Garland, who served as president of Miami University from 1996-2006 and oversaw the construction of opulent campus facilities during his tenure, said that the university was pressured by a limited budget to recruit out-of-state students by adding “the kinds of accouterments that really dressed up a campus.” However, he argues, “if everyone has a climbing wall and a new recreation center and serves sushi, then it

¹ A 2014 University of Massachusetts Medical School study published in *JAMA Dermatology* found that more than half a million students at U.S. colleges and universities have access to on-campus tanning beds (Pagoto et al., 2014).

doesn't become a marketing advantage. [I]t just becomes something you do to avoid falling behind everyone else” (Wang, 2013). Many other public universities have gone to great lengths to provide such accoutrements: the University of Missouri’s \$50 million campus recreation center features an indoor beach, a full-service spa, and a 28-person hot tub; Texas Tech University boasts a \$7.26 million “leisure pool” with water slides, a lazy river, and a poolside café (Rubin, 2014). Jacob, McCall, & Stange (2013) found that both out-of-state and “lower ability” students are less likely to graduate are more willing to pay for such amenities. To explain this new dynamic of financial priorities at colleges and universities, Flanagan (2015) points to the “evolving status [of the student] in the world of higher learning—less a student than a consumer”:

To understand this change, it helps to think of college not as an institution of scholarly pursuit but as the all-inclusive resort that it has in recent years become—and then to think of the undergraduate who drops out or transfers as an early checkout. Keeping hold of that kid for all four years has become a central obsession of the higher-ed-industrial complex. How do you do it? In part, by importing enough jesters and bards to keep him from wandering away to someplace more entertaining, taking his Pell grant and his 529 plan and his student loans with him. (p. 56)

While arguing in their promotional discourse that college is an investment with inevitable payoff—even at exorbitant costs—these institutions hike tuition rates to enhance facilities that will attract students who are less likely to succeed academically once they are on campus. This trend suggests that traditional colleges and universities are, for their own financial benefit, willing to devote substantial resources to competing with other institutions and recruiting prospective students, a tactic more commonly associated with FPCUs. Such measures are an enactment of the rhetorical packaging of higher education as a consumer good, in which a larger investment on the part of the student is justifiable given the inevitable dividends it will pay.

That a college degree is all but essential to one's economic success is borne out by statistics about education and employment. President Obama has repeatedly emphasized his administration's belief that everyone in the U.S. should have the opportunity to pursue higher education. In a 2009 address, he went so far as to implore every American citizen to complete some level of higher education:

I ask every American to commit to at least one year or more of higher education or career training. This can be community college, a four-year school, vocational training, or an apprenticeship. But whatever the training may be, every American will need to get more than a high school diploma. (Obama, 2009)

A 2011 report by the Harvard Graduate School of Education praised Obama for focusing attention on pathways to higher education that are not limited to a bachelor's degree, but noted that significant gaps in student outcomes, particularly among students of color and financially disadvantaged students, make Obama's goal a problematic one: "Given these dismal attainment numbers, a narrowly defined 'college for all' goal—one that does not include a much stronger focus on career-oriented programs that lead to occupational credentials—seems doomed to fail" (Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011, p. 7). The authors of the report recommend the development of more effective vocational training programs and that employers in the U.S. begin hiring graduates of those programs instead of making a bachelor's degree a prerequisite for entry-level jobs. As long as employers continue to privilege higher education, however, many adults who otherwise would not have access to college—or would not think they are prepared for college—will pursue degrees at FPCUs, since they are often more convenient for non-traditional students and their promotional discourse so specifically targets their demographic. Beha (2011) argues that Obama's goal for the U.S. to lead the world in the percentage of adults with college degrees "might prove impossible to meet, but if it is going to happen it will mean educating a lot more students at schools like [the University of] Phoenix" (p. 53).

While both the not-for-profit and for-profit sectors are complicit in this paradigm shift, FPCUs more explicitly leverage the argument that a college degree is crucial to economic success in order to recruit students. Given their high cost of tuition, low rates of retention and graduation, and the disproportionate amount of federal student aid borrowed by their students², FPCUs are especially illustrative of how college recruitment rhetoric elaborates and sustains potentially problematic conceptions of higher education's value.

An Overview of the Dissertation

Based on the well-established scholarly position that language and discourse play a constitutive role in the public's understanding of education and, consequently, in the shaping of public attitudes, theoretical work in three areas—discourse analysis, rhetorical analysis, and literacy studies—guides the examination of the following research questions: 1) How do texts intended to advertise FPCUs sustain the neoliberal discourses of education that emerged in the 1980s, and what do these texts reveal about the current landscape of higher education? 2) How do texts intended to explore the social role of education, such as documentary films and public policy debates, create and sustain particular discursive strains? 3) How do rhetoric and public discourse influence students' decisions to pursue higher education, and how can the methodology of discourse analysis reveal the ways students accept or reject that rhetoric? 4) What can be revealed about the dominant discourses of higher education by considering the experiences of a generation of students currently faced with the FPCU option? 5) How can we

² A 2012 Senate investigation revealed that the 15 largest for-profit colleges by enrollment received 86% of their revenue from the federal government in the form of federal student loans, and those schools spent nearly a quarter (23%) of their budgets on recruitment and marketing (Douglas-Gabriel, 2015).

characterize the nature of literacy sponsorship that proprietary colleges offer by examining the language they use to market their product?

To address my research questions, I analyze the linguistic framing of education at three levels: texts intended to analyze the role of education in American society (documentary films); texts intended to promote FPCUs (e.g., advertisements, internal documents, and public endorsements); and texts reflecting the impact of the various discourses on students who commit to FPCUs (interviews, testimonials, and reports). My project begins with a review of relevant scholarly work in the fields of discourse analysis, rhetoric studies, and literacy studies, particularly recent analyses of artifacts related to higher education and K-12 education reform. The first chapter then introduces the foundational texts that form the basis of pro-privatization education reform discourse. Together, these reviews of theoretical and foundational texts will contextualize the analyses I present in subsequent chapters.

Since FPCU advertisements emerge from the same discursive strains as arguments for K-12 education reform, chapter 2 presents an analysis of the 2011 documentary film *Waiting for "Superman."* The film, which grossed nearly \$6.5 million in ticket sales during its theatrical run, focuses on the stories of five children in Washington, D.C. and New York City who vie for coveted spots in privately managed charter schools. The tension hinges on whether the children featured in the film will be accepted to these charter schools via a lottery drawing or forced to attend inner-city public institutions. *Waiting for "Superman"* purports to expose the flaws of the public school system in the United States and the disproportionate effect its failings have on poor children in America's inner cities.

The goal of my analysis of the film is threefold: to examine the rhetorical strategies the film's director employs to make his argument for charter schools, to reveal the presence of

neoliberal education reform rhetoric embedded in the film's narrative, and to establish a foundation for the relationship between the language of corporate education reform efforts and the promotional discourse of FPCUs. Many of the persuasive techniques in FPCU advertisements assume the audience has accepted the same arguments for K-12 education reform that are presented in *Waiting for "Superman,"* as they use terms and ideas that they hope will invoke the audience's feelings of dissatisfaction with American public education in general.

First, I briefly examine the recent use of documentary films to promote political agendas and introduce "the new education documentary," my term for the films released in 2010 which, like *Waiting for "Superman,"* advocate privately funded charter schools. I discuss the relationship between the narrative established in *A Nation at Risk* and the charter school movement. Next, through a narrative analysis of the film and its marketing materials and close readings of several scenes in the film, I look at the ways Guggenheim obscures the political and financial interests supporting the charter schools he represents in order to appeal to a broad, bipartisan audience.

Drawing from my analysis of *Waiting for "Superman"* and the rhetoric of market-oriented education reform, the third chapter presents an analysis of recent television advertisements for FPCUs, specifically advertisements for the University of Phoenix. Discourse analysis guides my examination of the constitutive nature of the "social reality" of higher education in these texts. Using critical discourse analysis (CDA) and narrative rhetorical analysis, which facilitates an consideration of how social phenomena "are produced by specific discursive actions and events" and are influenced by "the social context and discourse that support [them]" (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 23), I argue that advertisements for FPCUs—which

are widely viewed and distributed—provide evidence of the discursive construction of the value of higher education.

The third chapter also draws on theoretical work in the field of rhetorical analysis to develop a holistic understanding of the persuasive function of such advertisements. Advertisements for other institutions, like Kaplan University, often feature actors portraying single mothers and low-wage workers, directly appealing to the disenfranchised, financially disadvantaged population they hope to enroll. The messages, though, are generally the same; the advertisements argue that a college's "quality" can be measured in how effectively it prepares students for the job market, and that pursuing higher education is a guaranteed route to financial success. Given the prominent role of video as part of the data considered, the analysis of visual rhetoric is informed by the work of Foss (1994; 2004; 2005) and narrative analysis is based on the theoretical work of Phelan (1989; 1996; 2005; 2007) and White (1981). I also analyze internal training documents for FPCU recruiters and the transcripts of undercover meetings between FPCU recruiters and people posing as applicants. These artifacts that represent direct student recruitment discourse, which my interviews reveal to be far more persuasive to prospective students than FPCU advertisements.

The fourth chapter of my study presents interviews with current students at for-profit colleges and my analysis of those interviews. My interviews with FPCU students reveal how students' interpretive frames of the value of higher education are shaped by the broader context of the public discourse I analyze in the preceding chapters. My qualitative research addresses how advertisements for colleges and universities, those institutions' officially sanctioned statements of educational policy and philosophy, and arguments in the media and in popular culture about the value of college all influence students to attend different types of institutions of

higher education. My study presents data from personal narratives about higher education elicited during semi-structured interviews with nontraditional students who attend classes at for-profit colleges either online or at physical campuses. The methodology used to analyze interview data and personal narratives about education is that of Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1989, 1992, 1995; Wodak & Meyer, 2008), the Ethnography of Communication (Hymes, 1964, 1974; Gumperz & Hymes, 1972), and Interactional Sociolinguistics (Gumperz, 1982; Tannen, 2006). The resulting theoretical framework foregrounds the relationship between individual students' discourse and the public discourse of education. Phillips and Hardy (2002) argue that one function of discourse analysis is to "connect 'microevents,' like interviews, 'to broader discourses as a way to show how narratives and conversations construct social experiences' (p. 9). My aim is to understand how pro-privatization rhetoric about education over the last thirty years has influenced the way that colleges and universities themselves articulate their purposes to the public and students' reasons for pursuing higher education. My analyses reveal that the powerful strains of public discourse that encourage all Americans to pursue higher education at any cost inadvertently lead underprepared students to enroll in FPCUs, and that direct student recruitment strategies, coupled with FPCU advertisements, are extremely effective recruiting tools. Further, my interviews reveal that nontraditional students are often apprehensive about pursuing higher education and are attracted to the innovative and flexible programs at FPCUs; however, the discursive configuration of higher education as a four-year residential experience in the public imagination establishes their expectations for what college should be, leading to a sense of disappointment, failure, and feelings that students are settling for a "remedial" college experience.

As colleges and universities, both for-profit and not-for-profit, act as purveyors of literacy as an economic commodity, my project addresses questions of economic access and opportunity that are intrinsically political. Thus, the conclusion of the dissertation presents an analysis of the artifacts in the preceding chapters—the discourse of education policy, the promotional discourse of colleges and universities, and the narratives of FPCU students—through the lens of literacy studies (Brandt, 1998, 2001; Scribner, 1984; Street, 1993, 2001). As literacy sponsors, colleges and universities are in a position to bestow the social and economic value of literacy upon students; however, through their public discourse, they simultaneously determine the value of a college degree. I conclude that traditional colleges and universities have a social responsibility not only to counter the reckless recruitment strategies of FPCUs by offering a forthright public discussion of the costs and benefits of attending college, but also to look critically at their own promotional discourse to ensure that they avoid using potentially manipulative rhetorical techniques to attract at-risk student populations without attending to their unique needs.

This study is particularly relevant because of concerns within the government and the general public about the rising costs of college tuition and the looming student debt crisis. On June 11, 2014, the U.S. Senate voted 56-38 against a measure proposed by Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) to allow Americans to refinance their student loan debt at more affordable interest rates (Lavender & Wing, 2014). Warren's proposed legislation was a response to the \$1.3 trillion in student loan debt in the U.S. and the staggering 14.9% default rate on that debt among recent college graduates. In a speech in September of 2013, Warren argued that student loan debt is particularly crippling for young students and graduates because "[the loans] are inexorable—you can't get rid of them" (Kingdale, 2013). It is nearly impossible to escape student

loan debt by declaring bankruptcy, and student loan collectors are able to garnish wages or withhold income tax returns in the case of default.

As the cost of higher education rises, students bear an even more serious financial burden: Starting on July 1, 2014, the interest rate on federal student loans increased from 3.86% to 4.66% (McGrath, 2014). Barring legislative action, these interest rates will continue to rise alongside the cost of tuition. If institutions—both private and public—are “selling college” on the basis of its practical utility, they should also be realistic about the costs of attending college and the likelihood of securing employment after graduation. FPCUs overtly downplay the potential consequences of accruing student loan debt when recruiting prospective students, and traditional four-year colleges and universities have begun to follow suit. Thus, the language these institutions use to frame the costs, benefits, and risks of enrolling in college—and that of the K-12 education policy that continues to influence it—is worthy of further scrutiny.

Chapter One

Mapping the Discursive Landscape of Higher Education

FPCUs in the Landscape of Higher Education

During the 2013-2014 academic year, for-profit colleges and universities (FPCUs) enrolled nearly 2.4 million students, a group that constituted 12% of all postsecondary students in the United States (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2013). Since many FPCUs offer flexible class schedules, online courses, and conveniently located satellite campuses, these institutions are an attractive option for many non-traditional college students. A substantial number of students at FPCUs come from financially disadvantaged households, and a large percentage represents racial minorities: In 2008, 26.8% of FPCU students were African-American and 21% were Hispanic, compared to 12.6% and 11.8%, respectively, at public, four-year institutions. Among financially dependent students who attend FPCUs, 54% come from families with incomes below \$40,000 per year, compared to only 35% of students at public, two-year institutions and 25% of students at public, four-year institutions (Baum and Payea, 2011).

FPCUs have faced significant public and government scrutiny in recent years because of their low graduation rates and the disproportionate amount of federal student loans taken out by their students. In 2010, only 22% of first-time, full-time students at FPCUs completed their degree programs within six years, compared to 55% at public, four-year institutions (Baum and Payea, 2011). A 2008 study by the National Center for Education Statistics revealed that in the 2007-2008 academic year, nearly one fourth (24%) of all financial aid in the form of Pell Grants was awarded to students at FPCUs. An indication of the public funds being claimed by for-profit academic institutions is the \$5 billion in revenue from federal student aid that the University of Phoenix alone collected during the 2010-2011 academic year (National Conference of State

Legislatures, 2013). While community colleges—public, not-for-profit two-year institutions—have comparably low graduation rates and typically enroll students from the same demographic, two-year institutions are significantly less expensive than FPCUs and fewer of their students take out federal loans: The average cost of a two-year associate’s degree from a community college is \$8,200, compared to \$35,000 at a for-profit institution, and only 13% of community college students receive federal aid, compared to a staggering 96% of students enrolled in for-profit colleges (Lee, 2012).

Another salient difference between not-for-profit, two-year community colleges and FPCUs is the institutions’ respective student recruitment tactics. Several FPCUs have been investigated because of their aggressive and deceptive recruiting practices, which often target financially disadvantaged students, veterans, and racial minorities. In 2011, the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee conducted oversight hearings led by Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) to address concerns about the recruiting tactics used by FPCUs (Lewin, 2012). During these hearings, internal training documents from ITT Technical Institute revealed that recruiters were instructed to appeal to prospective students’ fears, anxieties, and past traumas—a strategy one document called “poking the pain”—in order to pressure them to enroll (see Appendix A). Kaplan University, another FPCU, told its recruiters to use a similar technique: “Keep digging until you uncover [the prospective student’s] pain, fears and dreams,” the document reads (“Documents,” 2011, p. 13). Yet another for-profit institution, Vatterott Educational Centers, described pain as a “greater motivator” than logic: “We deal with people that live in the moment and for the moment. Their decision to start, stay in school or quit school is based more on emotion than logic” (“Documents,” 2011, p. 24). Vatterott told its recruiters, “We serve the UNDER world, Unemployed, Underpaid, Unsatisfied, Unskilled, Unprepared, Unsupported,

Unmotivated, Unhappy, Underserved” (“Documents,” 2011, p. 26). While these discursive practices were not meant to be made public, they reflect a linguistically-mediated element of FPCU’s promotional strategies: an attempt to attract students from socially marginalized populations who are academically unprepared for higher education and will be motivated to enroll based on their belief that attending college is essential to their financial success.

Further, this “behind-the-scenes” promotional discourse echoes an understanding within FPCUs that personal trauma and dissatisfaction are potential motivators for prospective students to attend college. This same strategy is enacted in advertisements for FPCUs, in which prospective students’ financial instability and unsuccessful experiences with traditional education are used as leverage to persuade them to enroll. In November 2015, Education Management Corporation (EMC)—which, at the time of this writing, is the second-largest for-profit college operator in the country—agreed to pay \$90 million to settle a lawsuit that accused the company of rewarding employees for enrolling students and “encouraging hyperaggressive boiler room tactics to increase revenue” (Saul, 2015). According to the *New York Times*, EMC was accused of “violating a federal ban on per capita incentive compensation at institutions that participate in federal student financial aid programs,” which is designed to “prevent the enrollment of unqualified students” (Saul, 2015). Harry Litman, the attorney representing the whistleblowers at EMC, told the *New York Times* that a joke within the corporation was that in order to qualify for enrollment, “a student needed only ‘a pulse and a Pell’” (Saul, 2015). In November 2015, the University of Phoenix announced that it was also under federal investigation for its recruiting practices.

Despite these investigations and attempts in many states to tighten regulations on these institutions’ recruiting practices, students continue to enroll in FPCUs in great numbers. At the

time of this writing, very little research has been conducted about FPCU students' attitudes toward higher education or reasons for pursuing higher education at for-profit institutions. In early 2014, however, the nonprofit research organization Public Agenda published the results of a survey of hundreds of prospective and current students at FPCUs, as well as alumni of these institutions (Hagelskamp, Schleifer, and DiStasi, 2014). The authors of the report found that "while various observers have debated for-profits' value, largely missing from these debates have been the positions of prospective and current for-profit students, for-profit alumni and the employers who might hire them" (Hagelskamp, Schleifer, and DiStasi, 2014, p. 30). Through these surveys, the researchers discovered some troubling trends:

Our surveys reveal a surprising lack of familiarity with the concept "for-profit college" even among for-profit undergraduates and recent alumni, let alone prospective students. Moreover, we find that only a minority of for-profit students know how much debt students at their schools typically graduate with and what types of jobs and salaries graduates have. (p. 30)

More disturbing than students' lack of knowledge about these institutions is the fact that the rhetorical strategies used in FPCU advertisements, according to the Public Agenda study, are extremely effective tools for recruiting students. The report found that "adult prospective students interested in for-profit schools are more likely than others to say they learned about colleges from advertisements" (p. 2).

While the information gathered by Public Agenda is useful (and long overdue), the online survey conducted by the group offered only questions with multiple-choice answers and a few open-ended questions. Missing from Public Agenda's report are personal narratives from current students at institutions of higher education, which leaves a tremendous gap between scholarship about public discourse and narratives of personal experience. Moreover, Public Agenda's report,

like most critiques of FPCUs, posits for-profit institutions as isolated phenomena that have no meaningful relationship with higher education in general.

These two tendencies in literature about FPCUs—the myopic understanding of FPCUs as anomalies in an otherwise democratically-oriented, egalitarian educational environment and the absence of students’ stories and voices—have left significant gaps in research about these schools’ public discourses, how these institutions market themselves to prospective students, and the experiences of students themselves. Both for-profit and non-profit institutions of higher education are responding to a climate in which a college education is an extremely valuable economic commodity, and institutions in both sectors must “sell” that commodity by competing with each other and articulating a particular conception of education in order to recruit students.

To address these gaps in scholarship, this project offers a comprehensive analysis that explains how FPCUs rhetorically construct themselves in the broader landscape of higher education and how their persuasive strategies influence prospective students. I argue that the recruitment rhetoric of colleges and universities reveals how they understand their role as purveyors of literacy and to what degree they value literacy as an economic commodity. The language institutions use to package and market education can help us characterize the nature of literacy sponsorship that colleges, including FPCUs, offer their students. Further, I argue that the same discursive paradigm that has prompted pro-privatization K-12 education reform is present in the promotional discourse of FPCUs and public discourse about higher education.

Through the theoretical lenses of discourse studies, rhetorical analysis, and literacy studies, this study reveals the implications of the “selling” of higher education to the at-risk student populations these institutions attract and the constitutive role of language in arguments for the privatization of public commodities. In this chapter, I introduce these theoretical lenses

and review extant literature in which these lenses are applied to public discourse about education. Next, I discuss the foundational texts that have constructed and influenced contemporary discourse about the purposes and responsibilities of educational institutions.

Discourse Analysis and Education

Given its theoretical investment in the linguistic framing of social issues and the discursive construction of social reality, the field of discourse analysis provides an ideal lens for examining the complex discursive practices at play in FPCU student recruitment and revealing what FPCUs and their students reflect about the broader landscape of education. In *Approaches to Discourse* (1994), Schiffrin identifies discourse analysis as “one of the most vast, but also one of the least defined, areas in linguistics” (p. 5). The range of definitions of *discourse*, according to Schiffrin, both reflects and emerges from the wide range of disciplinary resources that inform the theoretical and methodological assumptions of each approach. Because they originate from fields with divergent theoretical orientations and views of the interplay of culture, society, and language, these approaches vary significantly in both their assumptions about the relationship between language and social interaction and their methodological approaches to gathering and analyzing data. While Schiffrin (1994) defines *discourse* as “a unit of language larger than a sentence” (p. 3), other discourse analysts—depending on the goal of their research—define discourse in keeping with their conception of texts.

Because it accommodates a wide range of expressive phenomena—from casual conversations between two participants to vast bodies of historically related texts—discourse analysis allows an interrogation of the texts that constitute and influence current understandings of higher education and its role in our society. Phillips and Hardy (2002) understand discourse as

the mechanism by which we “understand our reality, our experiences, [and] ourselves”; in this view, *discourse* refers to “an interrelated set of texts, and the practices of their production, dissemination, and reception, that brings an object into being” (p. 3). They argue:

[Discourse analysis] examines how language constructs phenomena, not how it reflects and reveals it. In other words, discourse analysis views discourse as constitutive of the social world—not a route to it—and assumes that the world cannot be known separately from discourse. (p. 6)

Discourses of higher education, in this view, not only reflect the current ideological configurations of higher education and its purpose; they create them. Since we cannot, Phillips and Hardy argue, “find discourses in their entirety” (p. 5), we must analyze bodies of texts and the connections between those texts to understand how social reality is constructed. In order to fully understand how those texts function to create social reality, we must also examine the social context within which discourses are produced (Bauman & Sherzer, 1974; van Dijk, 1997).

Discourse analysis is also instrumental in maintaining a historically situated understanding of the evolving conceptions of higher education. Fairclough and Wodak (1997) argue that discourse is only meaningful if we recognize that it is always “embed[ded] in a certain culture and ideology”:

Discourse is not produced without context and cannot be understood without taking context into consideration ... Discourses are always connected to other discourses which were produced earlier, as well as those which are produced synchronically and subsequently. (p. 276)

Following this line of reasoning, the context in which arguments for education reform were produced—as well as an understanding of how those arguments are shaped and influenced by texts that preceded them—reveal the relationships among strains of education reform discourse and how they have manifested in various artifacts over several decades, thus sustaining a particular ideology. For example, a discourse analysis of “Fixing No Child Left Behind:

Innovation to Better Meet the Needs of Students” (2015), a U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, & Pensions roundtable discussion, could reveal the ideology underlying the language used during the discussion and various preceding discourses. During the roundtable, James McIntyre, the Superintendent of the Knox County Schools in Knoxville, Tennessee, says, “We want to maximize flexibility—to allow states, districts, schools, especially those who have proven success and [a] track record—to give them the flexibility to innovate” (“Fixing No Child Left Behind,” 2015). Later, Josh Davis, the Vice President of the Delta Health Alliance, agrees with the other roundtable members about the importance of “innovation, outcomes, and flexibility” in public schools (“Fixing No Child Left Behind,” 2015).

Those words, which are repeated by many of the roundtable’s participants throughout the discussion, invoke a variety of disparate texts: The original text of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) echoes McIntyre’s assertion that schools should be rewarded for “proving success” and demonstrating a “track record”; the Act states that education will be improved by “holding schools, local educational agencies, and States accountable for improving the academic achievement of all students” (No Child Left Behind, 2001, sec. 1001). No Child Left Behind also dictates that schools “demonstrate innovative practices” and serve as “continuing source[s] of innovation and educational improvement” (Sec. 5101), an idea invoked by McIntyre and Davis. What constitutes innovative practice, however, is not explained or articulated in these texts. Instead, the term “innovation” is meant to evoke previous discourses about the failure of public schools to “keep up” with evolving technology and the global economy. The discourses that formed and sustained the importance of innovation and outcomes in public education are critical components of contemporary debates about education, even if those discourses are not directly

referenced by participants. The Reagan administration's *A Nation at Risk* report (1983), which I will discuss in more depth later in this chapter, begins with the following paragraph:

Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world. This report is concerned with only one of the many causes and dimensions of the problem, but it is the one that undergirds American prosperity, security, and civility. We report to the American people that while we can take justifiable pride in what our schools and colleges have historically accomplished and contributed to the United States and the well-being of its people, the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. (p. 9)

The notion that underperforming, mediocre public schools jeopardize the United States' place in the global economy—and, indeed, threaten the security of its people—is alive and well in contemporary education reform debates, as demonstrated by the discourse of participants in the “No Child Left Behind” roundtable. While McIntyre and Davis do not directly state that U.S. public schools are mediocre, their statements reflect a lineage of discourses that begins with *A Nation at Risk*. Reagan-era arguments about the U.S. falling behind other countries economically because of our failing public schools led to arguments for charter schools; those arguments for charter schools demanded more flexibility, accountability, and room for innovation in schools, which is reflected in the discourse of No Child Left Behind and, later, President Obama's Race to the Top initiative (2009).

Beyond this consideration of context, discourse analysis also allows for an examination of how texts are received and understood by audiences. Phillips and Hardy (2002) argue that to understand the discursive level of a text is to understand “how structured sets of texts and the practices of their production, dissemination, and *reception* together constitute the social” (p. 87, emphasis added). That is, the dimension of the social context of discourse cannot be understood without considering how texts are received by their respective audiences. As such, an analysis of

broadly distributed texts, like the promotional discourse of colleges and universities, would be fundamentally lacking without a consideration of how the public—especially prospective students—understands and responds to that discourse.

In an analysis of the linguistic dimensions that construct institutions as large and complex as higher education, one must decide which texts to examine. Luke (1995) observes that “many educational analyses have difficulty showing how large-scale social discourses are systematically (or, for that matter, unsystematically) manifest in everyday talk and writing in local sites” (p. 11). Further, he argues, one of the limitations of discourse analysis in education research has been the “difficulty in bridging what we might broadly term ‘macro’ approaches to discourse with more microanalytic text analyses” (p. 10). However, Gee (1990) argues that focusing on “micro-level” linguistic events without considering their broader social and cultural context fails to bridge those different “levels” of text, since “all practice (human social action) is inherently caught up with usually tacit theories that empower or disempower people and groups of people” (p. 5). In an effort to address these gaps in scholarship, this study explores the success of for-profit institutions as a socio-cultural phenomenon that hinges on distinct public discursive strains of neoliberal³ rhetorics.

I argue that “macro-level” discourses such as advertisements and mission statements are constitutive actors in the creation of social reality and are reflected in the “micro-level”

³ Fish (2009) notes that the term “neoliberal” often carries a “pejorative” connotation. My use of the term is not intended to be derogatory, but descriptive; I use the term to label the system of values that guides many market-based approaches to education reform. I will borrow Treanor’s (2005) definition, which Fish cites: “Neoliberalism is a philosophy in which the existence and operation of a market are valued in themselves, separately from any previous relationship with the production of goods and services... and where the operation of a market or market-like structure is seen as an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide for all human action, and substituting for all previously existing ethical beliefs.”

discourses of face-to-face talk, in which individuals negotiate and mediate their identities. Luke (1995) argues that in interviews and other instances of spoken texts, there are “moments in which cultural representations and social relations and identities are articulated through language” and “discourse... unfolds in uneven... and unpredictable social configurations,” opening spaces in which “socially constructed and contested [identities] are made and remade” (p. 14). Thus, in my study, interviews with current and former students at FPCUs represent texts that reflect the impact of various discourses on students who commit to FPCUs.

Discourse Analysis within the Field of Linguistics

Sapir (1921) describes language as “a purely human and noninstinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols” (p. 7). As a field, linguistics views language as a system of symbols that operates under an abstract system of prescriptive rules; a productive study of language looks to uncover the rules that keep the linguistic system functional. Within the field of linguistics, there is a commonly accepted hierarchy of six levels of analysis which fall into two broader categories: structure and meaning. The first three levels of analysis—phonology, morphology, and syntax—are concerned with the structural properties of language. The second half of the hierarchy deals with meaning: semantics (meaning at the level of the word), pragmatics (meaning dependent on context and social intention), and discourse (meaning dependent on multiple social, historical, cultural, practical, and linguistic factors).

Citing what she identifies as one of its prevalent definitions, Schifffrin (1994) describes discourse as “a unit of language larger than a sentence” (p. 3), but this definition is deceptively simple: At the heart of discourse studies is how—and why—we sense that linguistic units larger

than the sentence convey meanings that are more than the sum of the syntactic parts, which inevitably prompts a more complex consideration of the social dimensions of language use. Indeed, Schiffrin identifies a theoretical problem with understanding language as the six-level hierarchy described above: Such an understanding “foster[s] the view that one can describe language in a unitary way that continues unimpeded from morpheme to clause to sentence to discourse” (p. 29). Discourse, she argues, is an entirely different creature than the “lower level linguistic constituents” that fall into the lower categories of the hierarchy and, as such, cannot be classified or understood as a parallel category. There is much more to consider, after all, when we analyze discourse. Hymes (1974) argues that we cannot limit our analysis to “linguistic form, a given code, or even speech itself” (p. 4). Instead, he writes, “communication... must provide the frame of reference within which the place of language in culture and society is to be assessed” (p. 4). Analysis of discourse should address questions of what people do with language in different cultural and social circumstances: How do we use language to negotiate relationships and interact with others in social situations? How does discourse produce (and reproduce) historically and socially situated meanings?

Given the various competing understandings of what constitutes discourse, I will establish a foundational definition: For the purposes of my project, *discourse* refers to the analysis of language in use and is “interdependent with social life, such that its analysis necessarily intersects with meanings, activities, and systems outside of itself” (Schiffrin, 1994, p. 31). My definition is also influenced by the Foucauldian understanding of discourse as “part of the network of knowledge and power shaped by disciplines and institutions with their complex interactions and motivations” (Bizzell and Herzberg, 2001, p. 15). An overview of the two dominant and competing views of discourse—formalist and functionalist—will provide a

foundation for my analysis of the role of discourse in the construction of the ideology of higher education.

The Formalist Paradigm of Discourse

Schiffrin's aforementioned definition of discourse—"language above the sentence"—is the preferred definition of those who ascribe to the formalist (or structuralist) paradigm of language. Schiffrin notes that "structural analyses focus on the way different units function in relation to each other" (p. 24) while generally disregarding context beyond those internal relationships. Formalists within the field of linguistics, most notably Noam Chomsky, are concerned with the discovery, classification, and description of structural features of language and its universal (rather than culturally or contextually contingent) qualities. Schiffrin writes that a major assumption underlying the formalist view is the notion that language "may very well have social and cognitive functions, [but] these functions do not impinge upon the internal organization of language" (p. 22).

This attention to patterns and features becomes problematic when the goal of an analysis is to understand the *meaning* of language. Formalist views of language fail to account for instances in which there is an inconsistent relationship between the meaning of an utterance and its syntactic features. Further, if we are to conceive of discourse as "language above the sentence," then we would naturally need to question the nature of the sentence itself. When people speak, they do not speak in what formalists would classify as sentences. Spoken sentences also often overlap, get interrupted, or remain unfinished. As Schiffrin points out, "If sentences have no existence outside of discourse—if they are created by discourse—then it is confusing (and perhaps even meaningless) to try to define discourse as something larger than the very thing

that it creates” (p. 26). Beyond this troubling paradox, Gumperz (1982) argues that formalists’ fixation on the description and classification of structural features eschews “broader questions of meaning, interpretation and communicative effect to focus only on those aspects of verbal signaling which proved useful” (p. 16) in classifying the surface-level features of language.

Because of their emphasis on structural features, formalist approaches to discourse do not account for the social factors surrounding language use or the role of language in producing (and reproducing) beliefs, knowledge, and ideology. Thus, a formalist view of language would not accommodate an analysis of the broader discourses of education policy and how those discourses shape advertisements for FPCUs. For example, a 2012 advertisement for Kaplan University, “A Different School of Thought,” is accompanied by the following voiceover:

Change is a choice. You either stick to the status quo or confront it. Crack open your potential and see what you’re capable of, not what you’re comfortable with. We weren’t comfortable with how the educational system was working, so we changed it. (“Kaplan University: A Different School of Thought,” 2012)

A formalist analysis would identify and classify the internal syntactic features of the text, but would not consider the external sociopolitical conditions that led to those particular features appearing in the text or the possible effect this text would have on an audience. For example, references to the “status quo” and the dysfunctional “educational system” are very common in the discourse of FPCUs (and in pro-privatization education reform discourse generally, as I demonstrate in my analysis of the rhetoric of *Waiting for “Superman”* in the next chapter). Those features appear in the text not only to perform certain linguistic functions, but to invoke broader discourses of education reform.

Furthermore, a formalist linguistic paradigm does not allow us to consider the significance of elements such as the images in FPCU advertisements. “A Different School of Thought,” for instance, features several images of African-American women studying while

sitting alone at nighttime in urban settings. Within a formalist paradigm, these images could not be interpreted alongside the voiceovers that accompany them, since they lack quantifiable linguistic features. However, these images are essential to understanding the argument presented by the advertisement and the audience it is intended to reach. Images do not merely accompany the meaning created by the voiceover; they are essential features of the text that co-create its meaning. Given the demographics of students at FPCUs—22 percent are African American and 65 percent are female (Deming, Goldin, & Katz, 2013)—the images of African-American women are discursive elements that merit attention, since they partially constitute the meaning of the text. In order to account for such phenomena in FPCU advertisements, I turn to the functionalist paradigm, which views discourse as language in use.

The Functionalist Paradigm of Discourse

A functionalist view of language holds that discourse is “a system—a socially and culturally organized way of speaking—through which particular functions are realized” (Schiffrin, 1994, p. 32). A functionalist view of discourse allows an analyst to consider social factors and cultural contexts, which would be seen as superfluous in a structuralist analysis but are critical to understanding how language *works*—that is, what it enacts in the world. More importantly, the functionalist approach allows the analyst to *interpret* the data she is presented with instead of merely allowing her to *describe* that data. For example, the preceding analysis of phrases like “status quo” and the “educational system” in the Kaplan University advertisement require the analyst to recognize and interpret allusions to other strains of discourse and the significance of those allusions.

Importantly for this project, the functionalist orientation allows the analyst to consider the role of participants' knowledge in communicative exchanges. One cannot communicate if one does not have socio-communicative knowledge (or what Hymes (1974) refers to as "communicative competence"); thus, Gumperz (1982) writes:

A general theory of discourse strategies must begin by specifying the linguistic and socio-cultural knowledge that needs to be shared if conversational involvement is to be maintained, and then go on to deal with what it is about the nature of conversational inference that makes for cultural, subcultural, and situational specificity of interpretation. (p. 3)

A functionalist view of language and discourse would accommodate an analysis of how audiences receive and interpret texts based on individual knowledge. If, for example, a viewer of the aforementioned Kaplan University advertisement were familiar with the popular notion that public education is a fundamentally flawed system, then the references to the "status quo" and the need to change a dysfunctional "educational system" would influence his or her interpretation of the advertisement. Indeed, the effectiveness of the advertisement hinges on the audience's familiarity with several strains of discourse about education; the functionalist approach to discourse allows us to analyze and interpret those strains of discourse alongside an artifact such as the Kaplan University advertisement.

Given the fact that FPCU advertisements are designed to persuade socially and economically marginalized groups to accept a particular framing of higher education, my project is invested in the political implications of the promotional discourse of FPCUs. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the lens through which I will analyze the discourse of FPCUs, is heavily invested in the ways that social and economic power is enacted through discourse. Social power, van Dijk (1993) argues, is awarded to particular individuals and groups on the basis of "privileged access to socially valued resources" such as wealth, knowledge, and education;

however, access to “various genres, forms, or contexts of discourse and communication” (p. 254) is also an important source of that power. Since FPCUs are for-profit corporations with large amounts of economic and social capital relative to their prospective students, they have access to media like television, radio, and the internet, which allows them to be active agents in the production and distribution of public discourse. Their intended audience, however, is comprised of financially disadvantaged people with comparatively limited access to different forms of media. Therefore, within this configuration, the target audience tends to be people who—presumably because of their relatively limited formal education—are less likely to be media savvy or to respond to the FPCUs advertisements critically. The theoretical mechanism by which CDA illuminates these power differentials is influenced by the work of French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault, who seeks to destabilize and problematize our understanding of cohesive discursive constructions of history, power, and knowledge.

Discourse and Social Reality: The Foundations of CDA

In *The Order of Discourse* (1971) and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), Foucault defines discourse extremely broadly: as “macro-level” statements—“different in form, and dispersed in time”—which, at various historically situated moments, work together to create “discursive objects” or “discursive formations” (Foucault, 1972, p. 32). He describes the relationship between statements and discourse as such:

Discourse is constituted by a group of sequences of signs, in so far as they are statements, that is, in so far as they can be assigned particular modalities of existence. The law of such a series is precisely what I have called a discursive formation, if I succeeded in showing that this discursive formation really is the principle of dispersion and redistribution, not of formulations, not of sentences, not of prepositions, but of statements, the term discourse can be defined as the group of statements that belong to a single system of formation. (Foucault, 1972, p. 107)

Instead of viewing discourse as merely statements that follow sets of rules, as other language analysts might, Foucault (1972) argues that we must instead try to excavate the historical moment at which statements were produced, trace the historical trajectory of ideas by looking at the “relations between statements” and the formations they constitute, and ask ourselves: “How is it that one particular statement appeared rather than another?” (p. 27). Once those statements have appeared, Foucault argues, social, legal, and cultural institutions—including education—reinforce and systematize these formations, which give only the illusion of stability but are constantly shifting in relation to other statements. In order to understand history, he argues, we must suspend our impulse to view history as a linear, progressive, cohesive narrative or accept concepts as self-evident. He uses the concept of mental illness (which he examines in more depth in *Madness and Civilization* [1960]) as an elegant illustration of this paradigm:

It would certainly be a mistake to try to discover what could have been said of madness at a particular time by interrogating the being of madness itself, its secret content, its silent, self-enclosed truth; mental illness was constituted by all that was said in all the statements that named it, divided it up, described it, explained it, traced its developments, indicated its various correlations, judged it, and possibly gave it speech by articulating, in its name, discourses that were to be taken as its own. (Foucault, 1972, p. 32)

In this view, discourse does not simply create or reflect meaning, nor is discourse merely the site of cultural or social practices. In Foucauldian discourse analysis, reality is “constituted” by the language used to describe it; that is, discourse—in the form of books, newspaper articles, speeches, and other media—is knowledge itself, shifting and changing as it is created, changed, disseminated, and repeated. Because of its instability, time is of the essence:

We must be ready to receive every moment of discourse in its sudden irruption; in that punctuality in which it appears, and in that temporal dispersion that enables it to be repeated, known, forgotten, transformed, utterly erased, and hidden, far from all view, in the dust of books. Discourse must not be referred to the distant presence of the origin, but treated as when it occurs. (Foucault, 1972, p. 25)

The unstable nature of knowledge, Foucault argues, demands that we turn our attention to discourse as it emerges and changes instead of searching for the significance of statements after their production.

Discourses of education are illustrative of the phenomena Foucault describes. The discourses of *A Nation at Risk*, arguments in support of charter schools, the No Child Left Behind Act, and other texts operate to form a vast network of temporally disconnected but ideologically interrelated representations of the reality of education. Indeed, in a Foucauldian view, these discourses construct a particular understanding of education and, albeit asynchronously and inexplicitly, reinforce a culturally situated ideological paradigm. In Foucault's understanding, discourse is an (almost) inconceivably huge and complex phenomenon, and one that systematically functions across spatial, temporal, and cultural dimensions to create our understanding of reality. Foucauldian discourse analysis views discourse as a constructivist phenomenon, in that it constitutes and creates our social reality. Phillips and Hardy (2002), viewing discourse through a markedly Foucauldian lens as the mechanism by which we "understand our reality, our experiences, [and] ourselves," define discourse as "an interrelated set of texts, and the practices of their production, dissemination, and reception, that brings an object into being" (p. 3). They argue:

This is the most important contribution of discourse analysis: It examines how language constructs phenomena, not how it reflects and reveals it. In other words, discourse analysis views discourse as constitutive of the social world—not a route to it—and assumes that the world cannot be known separately from discourse. (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 6)

Though some discourse analysts look at far smaller units of data in order to draw conclusions about how language works in its social context, functionalists see discourse as an enormously important and powerful force for creating and maintaining social order, reality, and control.

As their goal is to “explore the relationship between discourse and [social] reality,” Phillips and Hardy’s (2002) definition situates discourse as a “macro-level” phenomenon. Based on this understanding of discourse, they argue that approaches to discourse analysis can be compared based on two dimensions: the “relative importance of text versus context in the research” and “the degree to which power dynamics form the focus of the research... versus studies that focus more closely on the processes of social construction that constitute social reality” (p. 19). While Phillips and Hardy (2002) acknowledge that “some traditional qualitative approaches do lend themselves to discourse analysis”—such as the “microevents” examined in conversation analysis—they only view such approaches as useful inasmuch as the data they analyze can be “connect[ed] to broader discourses as a way to show how narratives and conversations construct social experience” (p. 9). So, while Phillips and Hardy (and other constructivists) see the utility of such qualitative approaches, they view “macro-level” texts as more illustrative of the role of discourse in shaping our social reality. This orientation is useful when considering the complex relationships between the “macro-level” texts related to higher education (e.g., policy debates, advertisements, and mission statements), which, in effect, represent the texts that “build” the social reality of higher education.

Since my project is invested in the social and material consequences of the marketing of higher education, CDA—as an analytical approach that is “primarily... motivated by pressing social issues, which it hopes to better understand through discourse analysis” (van Dijk, 1993, p. 252)—is particularly well-suited for the task of understanding the relationship between discourse and power. When the “macro-level” texts that represent higher education are somehow complicit in the formation of social and political inequality, CDA allows us to “critique the ways dominant discourses (indirectly) influence socially shared knowledge, attitudes and ideologies” and

“facilitate the formation of specific social representations” (van Dijk, 1993, p. 258-259). When powerful and wealthy institutions have exclusive access to discursive channels, the texts they produce enact what van Dijk (1993) calls the “management of social representation” (p. 257).

CDA, in and of itself, encompasses a wide range of analytical methods. In *Analyzing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research* (2003), Fairclough, who initially developed the framework for CDA, emphasizes the relationship between discourse and representation:

“Discourse figures in the representations which are always part of social practices—representations of the material world, of other social practices, reflexive self-representations of the practice in question” (p. 26). His definition of discourse is premised on the functionalist notion of discourse as language in use, but he adds to this definition substantially. In his view, discourse cannot be understood merely as texts, but as the relationship between the immediate and distant context of the text’s creation and institutional structures.

There is a clear relationship between Fairclough’s understanding of discourse and the Foucauldian definition, but there is an important distinction between the two: Fairclough believes that there is a place in discourse analysis for close examination of structural features of language. He argues for an examination of “internal” and “external” relations of texts. The former category includes such structural categories as phonology, semantics, grammar, and vocabulary, while the latter encompasses the more Foucauldian approach of investigating the relationship between discursive activity and social structures (Fairclough, 2003, p. 36).

Unlike Foucauldian discourse analysis, there is a place for the close analysis of language itself within the framework of CDA. Fairclough identifies three levels at which discourse can be analyzed: the level of the text (linguistic features), the level of discourse (the creation and dissemination of texts, as well as how they are interpreted or accepted by the public), and the

level of social practice (how invested the text is in maintaining or creating institutional power). Fairclough (2003) argues for a “bridge” between Foucauldian discourse analysis and linguistic analysis, identifying “a need to develop approaches to text analysis through a transdisciplinary dialogue with perspectives on language and discourse within social theory and research in order to develop our capacity to analyze texts as elements in social processes” (p. 6). Thus, though CDA is invested in close linguistic analysis, its primary focus remains on the “macro-level” texts engaged in Foucauldian analysis.

CDA’s primary methodological investment is borne of its understanding of discourse as representation of social practices: Its goal is to “reveal the way in which discursive activities help to construct institutions in which power is embedded through the way in which taken-for-granted understandings serve to privilege some actors and disadvantage others” (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 27). Discourse, in this view, is most productive when it is viewed as the locus of power imbalances, power relations, and the perpetuation of the status quo. Readers/listeners are particularly important in this analysis, since the way they understand texts—or, more importantly, how they can or do resist the representations embedded in those texts—is essential to how discourse maintains social reality. Further, part of CDA’s goal is to identify possible spaces of resistance where subjugated groups can resist the implementation of dominant discourses. As FPCU advertisements are explicitly directed toward traditionally disenfranchised groups—groups that many of these institutions openly acknowledge they hope to attract—CDA is a useful tool with which to recognize how FPCUs construct themselves via discursive channels in order to appeal to certain students. CDA’s concern with the role of language in the construction of social phenomena can be enhanced, however, by incorporating concepts pertaining to rhetorical analysis.

Rhetorical Analysis

Bizzell and Herzberg (2001) explain that *rhetoric* encompasses a broad range of interrelated meanings, including “the practice of oratory, the study of the strategies of effective oratory . . . the study of the persuasive effects of language, the study of the relation between language and knowledge, and the classification and use of tropes and figures” (p. 1). Rhetoric identifies “occasions for speaking and writing that can be regarded as persuasive in intent” and “categorizes the types of discourse it has selected, analyzes each of those types in terms of structure and purpose, and identifies the means for successfully constructing each type” (Bizzell & Herzberg, 2001, p. 2). While rhetoric was, in the classical Greek system, a method of teaching the skills necessary for persuasive public speaking, studies of rhetoric have expanded to provide an analytical lens into the production and reception of public discourses and the “source and status of knowledge” (Bizzell & Herzberg, 2001, p. 14). Following the notion that the study of rhetoric addresses the dynamic between language and knowledge, Foucault (1969) argues that rhetoric considers “schemata according to which groups of statements may be combined (how descriptions, deductions, definitions, whose succession characterizes the architecture of a text, are linked together)” (p. 57). According to Bizzell and Herzberg (2001), rhetorical theory “seeks to penetrate the complexities of communication and persuasion” while generating “a set of far-reaching, theoretical questions about the relationship of language to knowledge” (p. 2). For the purposes of this project, I will adopt the definition of rhetoric used by Burke (1950): “[T]he use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents” (p. 1337).

My rhetorical analysis of FPCU advertisements is informed by the work of Phelan (1996), whose work analyzes the persuasive implications of narrative. Since the advertisements

themselves contain the elements of narrative—character, setting, event, and narrative discourse—Phelan’s work provides a useful critical lens, since he illuminates the rhetorical dimension of narrative as action that “focus[es] on the relation between textual phenomena and audience response” and “requires audiences to judge its characters” (Phelan, 1996, p. 27). Rhetoric, Phelan argues, is “the synergy occurring between authorial agency, textual phenomena, and reader response” (p. xii). Thus, Phelan encourages an analysis of narrative that allows us to consider the *effect* (or intended effect) of the narratives within FPCU advertisements; after all, narrative is “not just story but also action, *the telling of a story by someone to someone on some occasion for some purpose*” (Phelan, 1996, p. 7-8, emphasis in original). Following the work of Burke and Booth, Phelan argues that viewing narrative as rhetoric is tantamount to “viewing narrative as having purpose of communicating knowledge, feelings, values, and beliefs” (p. 18).

As endeavors that are inherently concerned with the persuasive power of language, rhetorical analysis complements discourse analysis as a methodological tool. As Huckin, Andrus, and Clary-Lemon (2012) argue, just as particular methods of discourse analysis are concerned with how language creates and perpetuates ideas that might reinforce power discrepancies, rhetoric is also “compelled by the interplay between power and language” (p. 112). Even the dynamics of who is authorized to speak and who is compelled to listen suggest that power is an intrinsic element of rhetoric, particularly in the case of important social issues. Schroeder (1997) explains that “a person who can argue coherently and cogently commands a considerable amount of authority in our culture, and such a person is considered to be educated, to have power, and to be capable of taking his or her requisite place in society” (p. 95). Huckin, Andrus, and Clary-Lemon (2012) note that critically-oriented methods of discourse analysis share rhetoric’s concern with the persuasive power of language, as evidenced by its “tradition in attending to purpose,

situation, genre, diction, style, and other rhetorical variables” (p. 109). Thus, discourse analysis can enrich traditional rhetorical analysis by emphasizing the role of power inherent in effective persuasive appeals, allowing the researcher to analyze the connections within a large corpora of various types of texts, and—importantly for this project—providing “a lens with which the researcher can coordinate the analysis of larger (macro) political/rhetorical purposes with the (micro) details of language” (Huckin, Andrus, & Clary-Lemon, 2012, p. 111).

In recent years, scholars in the fields of education and communication have critiqued the rhetoric of education and the dramatic shift toward neoliberal policies in education reform movements. Ayers (2005) scrutinizes the neoliberal rhetoric of community college mission statements, arguing that community colleges, as traditionally populist and egalitarian institutions that serve marginalized students, have recently begun to alter their mission statements to reflect an increasingly market-oriented ethos. The way these institutions communicate their purpose to the public is particularly salient, Ayers argues, because of the population of students they attract; as the community college is “often the only viable educational option for members of marginalized communities, the structural outcomes of its mission are of great consequence to educators, policymakers, and citizens concerned with social justice and participatory democracy” (pp. 527-528). Further, Ayers argues that the discourse of community colleges is relevant because of the asymmetrical power dynamic between the individuals who control these institutions and the students who attend them. If community colleges are to act as democratic institutions that serve marginalized groups, Ayers argues, the discourse of the institution itself should be examined and, hopefully, changed:

On behalf of those who believe strongly in the egalitarian project of the community college, I aspire to reveal and challenge the discourse of neoliberalism, or market fundamentalism, and call for a counter-hegemonic discourse more fitting for an

institution that, by virtue of its accessibility, is well positioned to serve the interests of a democratic society. (Ayers, 2005, p. 529)

While mission statements are an important source of data for analysis, other discursive channels through which market-oriented ideology is delivered to the public need also be examined to demonstrate my interrelated claims: (1) FPCUs more aggressively and intentionally recruit the same marginalized population Ayers describes, meaning that they more explicitly engage in discursive practices that align with a pro-privatization ideology, and (2) traditional institutions of higher education enact similar techniques in response to economic and social pressure.

More recently, scholars have examined the discourse of education policy and the shifting rhetoric of the “purpose” of the university. Suspitsyna (2012), analyzing the discourse of the U.S. Department of Education, argues that in recent years, “discourse on higher education tends to give more prominence to universities’ participation in the economy than to their role in society” (p. 50). She acknowledges that analysis of the pro-privatization, economically utilitarian discourse of education is well-trodden ground, but that the role of “government rhetoric” has been overlooked in those analyses. However, missing from her study is a consideration of how—or if—that “government rhetoric” influences students’ decisions to attend college. Without a consideration of how “macro-discourses” like mission statements or public policy affect students within the educational system, such analyses are fundamentally one-sided.

CDA and Rhetorical Analysis as Complementary Approaches

An analysis of FPCU advertisements through the lens of CDA considers the ideological implications of discourse as given. But CDA is concerned with elements which are central to rhetorical analysis, such as attention to the persuasive function described by Burke (1950) and “purpose, situation, genre, diction, style, and other rhetorical variables” (Huckin, Andrus, &

Clary-Lemon, 2012, p. 109). Because it considers the “stylistic, verbal, syntactic, and figurative structure” of discourse and the “ways in which discursive and semiotic structures circulate or articulate ideology,” CDA enriches rhetorical analysis in terms of analysis of data, multimodality, and considerations of intertextuality (Huckin, Andrus, & Clary-Lemon, 2012, p. 118). These two interpretive orientations share another important point of overlap: a concern with “civic engagement and the ethical uses of language” (Huckin, Andrus, & Clary-Lemon, 2012, p. 113). Huckin, Andrus, and Clary-Lemon (2012) argue that “CDA concepts and principles have proved valuable in examining ways in which power is constructed rhetorically in educational settings,” since that the classroom is a place in which power is circulated, managed, exploited, resisted, and often directly impacted by institutional policies and changes” (p. 114). An analysis of rhetorical concepts, when complemented by CDA’s eye toward power inequalities, can reveal the complex strata of discursive strategies at work in FPCU advertisements.

CDA and rhetorical analysis also allow for a consideration of the two modes through which FPCU advertisements deliver their messages: verbal and visual. The television advertisements I analyze are multimodal, meaning that they “utilize... distinct modes to code... ideologies and discourses” (Kress, 1985, p. 38). In this multimodal environment, Kress (1985) argues, the verbal text provides “an anchorage for the visual text, constraining its meanings and making them more explicit” (p. 38). The visual elements of the advertisements are essential constitutive elements of their persuasive discourse; they construct and communicate meaning to the audience “without any need to use overt moralistic, political, or ideologically charged” linguistic elements (Kress, 1985, p. 35). In such multimodal texts, the advertisement “must be

read as the conjunction of meanings of the verbal and visual codes, as a single text” (Kress, 1985, p. 33).

Since shifts toward the privatization of education are not limited to colleges and universities, this project considers how these trends in higher education—along with the increase in the number of students who enroll in these for-profit institutions—coincide with an unprecedented wave of support for private charter schools and decreasing support for public education at the primary and secondary levels. Engel (2000) explains the shifting paradigm of education policy over the past few decades that has become “the conventional wisdom underlying almost all state educational reform programs”: “Educational excellence has largely come to mean the development of skills needed to improve the U.S. market position in global economic competition,” (p. 28) a stark reversal from the Jeffersonian and Deweyan understanding of education as a means of empowering and liberating citizens in a democratic society. Rury (2013) argues that “the neoliberal impulse to utilize market forces to gain efficiency and improve productivity could pose a threat to the democratic purposes of the schools, especially if it contributes to sorting students by income levels or social status” (p. 235). A comprehensive and critical analysis of the expressive phenomena of higher education takes that threat into account when considering the role of language in foundational shifts in the public’s understanding of how educational institutions function as purveyors of an economically valuable commodity: literacy.

Literacy Sponsorship

Individual literacy is intrinsically tied to social interaction. Scribner (1984) argues that “literacy abilities are acquired by individuals only in the course of participation in socially organized activities with written language” (p. 8). Indeed, according to Scribner:

Grasping what literacy “is” inevitably involves social analysis: What activities are carried out with written symbols? What significance is attached to them, and what status is conferred on those who engage in them? Is literacy a social right or a private power? (Scribner, 1984, p. 8)

Brandt (1998) argues that literacy is an economic commodity, one that acts as a “key resource in gaining profit” (p. 558). She emphasizes the ability of certain institutions to facilitate the development of literacy and, thus, to regulate the economic value of individual literacy. By virtue of their social, economic, and political power, such institutions act as literacy sponsors and, according to Brandt, “deliver the ideological freight that must be borne for access to what [sponsors] have (p. 557). Literacy sponsors can take advantage of that ideological freight by exploiting existing social and economic inequality or, she argues, they might be “oblivious” to the power dynamic of sponsorship. However, since literacy sponsors create and entrench hierarchies of opportunity and educational access and, in part, establish the value of literacy in a competitive economic environment, Brandt encourages us to be wary of literacy sponsors’ motivations.

Because of literacy’s economic value, Brandt writes, “the powerful work persistently to conscript and ration” it (p. 558). Economically disadvantaged groups have “less consistent, less politically secured access to literacy sponsors—especially to the ones that can grease their way to academic and economic success” (p. 559). The term “sponsorship” itself reflects the commercial value of literacy and the 20th century conception of reading and writing as “exploitable resources” (Brandt, 1998, p. 557). Institutions of higher education—including FPCUs—serve as

literacy sponsors insofar as they create opportunities for literacy learning. Further, these institutions “help organize and administer stratified systems of opportunity and access” (p. 557). The rhetorical strategies that institutions of higher education enact reflect how those institutions understand their roles as literacy sponsors. These institutions offer literacy sponsorship to prospective students, and their promotional materials reflect the “product” they sell. What, then, does their sponsorship offer to the sponsored?

Underlying this question is another foundational one: What are these institutions’ ambient understandings of education and its purpose? Institutions of higher education sell different conceptions of education, ones that are shaped by economic, social, and political forces. Scribner (1984) addresses the relationship between marginalized student populations and literacy sponsors: “Problems of poverty and political powerlessness are... inseparably intertwined with problems of access to knowledge and levels of literacy skills” (p. 12). Since the students who are most aggressively recruited by FPCUs are economically vulnerable and often belong to historically oppressed and marginalized groups, the institutions often frame literacy—and education generally—as a vehicle out of poverty and into a successful and lucrative career.

Foundational Texts

The linguistic framing of higher education across various forms of media reflects a paradigm that was first crystallized in *A Nation at Risk* (1983), the landmark Department of Education report commissioned by the Reagan administration which, in regard to American public education generally, “labels as ‘superfluous’ those [academic] courses that are not directly related to the development of marketable skills” (McIntush, 2000, p. 428) and prompted an ongoing, thirty-year trend of efforts to streamline and privatize public education. Since the

publication of *A Nation at Risk*, federal policies like No Child Left Behind (2001) and Race to the Top (2009) have sustained the ideology created and reflected by the report's rhetoric and, based largely on its tenets, have established varying standards for quantifying the effectiveness and efficiency of public education at the K-12 levels. Rury (2013) explains that though the assessment of the American public education system presented in *A Nation at Risk* was “deeply flawed” and that “subsequent research demonstrated that many of its assertions were mistaken” (p. 218), its effects on public opinion persisted for decades:

A direct line can be drawn from the prescriptions outlined in [*A Nation at Risk*] to the standards movement that later took shape in American education, culminating in No Child Left Behind... *A Nation at Risk* turned out to be a historically important document. It marked the beginning of a reform impulse that continues to influence changes in the schools today. (Rury, 2013, p. 218)

A significant result of that “reform impulse” has been the proliferation of charter schools, institutions that receive public funding but operate independently of school districts. Charter schools that are able to “innovate”—that is, to develop new methods for enhancing test scores and other measures of student achievement—are lauded as the potential solution for the purportedly failing public school system. In May 2014, President Obama inaugurated National Charter Schools Week, which he established in order to “pay tribute to the role our Nation’s public charter schools play in advancing opportunity” (The White House, 2014). In his Presidential Proclamation, he wrote:

As independent public schools, charter schools have the ability to try innovative approaches to teaching and learning in the classroom. This flexibility comes with high standards and accountability; charter schools must demonstrate that all their students are progressing toward academic excellence. Those that do not measure up can be shut down. And those that are successful can provide effective approaches for the broader public education system. (The White House, 2014)

Through his use of particular terms and phrases, Obama invokes the key values of *A Nation at Risk* and the pro-privatization educational reform movement of the last thirty years: innovation,

standards, accountability, measurability, and effectiveness. Public approval for this reform ideology is consistently high; a September 2014 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll found that 70% of Americans support the idea of charter schools and believe that they offer a “better education” than public schools. These results reflect the public’s widespread lack of confidence in American public education and acceptance of the pro-privatization argument that public education is an inefficient and failing system: The Phi Delta Kappa researchers reported that their survey respondents were more likely to express support for charter schools when they were “described as schools that can operate independently and free of regulations” (Phi Delta Kappa, 2014). The respondents’ willingness to support a system that is described as existing outside of bureaucratic restrictions reflects how thoroughly a majority of the public has accepted the ideology endorsed by education reform rhetoric. I argue that the capitalistic rhetoric that has saturated debates about education, rather than a clear, objective assessment of the quality of American education, is primarily responsible for these shifts in public attitudes.

Since charter schools are not as strictly beholden to regulation as traditional public schools, they are potentially susceptible to the influence of financial stakeholders; in Michigan, for example, nearly 80% of charter schools are run by for-profit education management organizations (Kain, 2011). Americans, however, largely believe that schools should be efficient and productive spaces that can demonstrate their value through calculable methods of assessment. Moreover, most Americans support the idea that if public schools fail to “perform,” competition among various types of institutions can help improve the educational system overall.

The idea that competition among educational institutions leads to a wider range of opportunities for students is a key component of pro-privatization K-12 education reform. That same ethos is reflected in the promotional discourse of FPCUs, in which traditional education is

articulated as a failed system crippled by bureaucratic restrictions. The next chapter presents an analysis of *Waiting for "Superman,"* a 2010 documentary film whose persuasive appeal hinged on its adherence to *A Nation at Risk*'s rhetorical tenets. The persuasive techniques in the film reflect the broader environment of public discourse in which FPCU advertisements are produced and distributed.

Chapter Two

Waiting for “Superman” and the Rhetoric of Education Reform

Waiting for “Superman” and the New Education Documentaries of 2010

The release of several documentary films about the declining quality of public education in the United States prompted *USA Today* columnist Greg Toppo to suggest that 2010 was “the year of the education documentary” (Toppo, 2010). While these films—*The Lottery*, directed by Madeleine Sackler, Bob Bowden’s *The Cartel*, Kelly Amis’s *Teached*, and Davis Guggenheim’s *Waiting for “Superman”*—address concerns about American public education from different perspectives, they ask the same fundamental questions: “Why do so many urban public schools do such a bad job—and what can be done to help kids trapped in them” (Toppo, 2010, para. 3)? They also reach a shared conclusion: American workers are no longer competitive in the global economy and that deficient public schools are primarily responsible for the country’s economic decline. The filmmakers suggest that charter schools—publicly funded, privately managed institutions that operate under minimal bureaucratic oversight—are the most promising solution for improving the quality of the American education system.

By far the most successful of these films, in terms of both critical acclaim and box office revenue, was *Waiting for “Superman.”* Directed by Guggenheim and produced by Lesley Chilcott, *Waiting for “Superman”* grossed nearly \$6.5 million in ticket sales during its theatrical run. Focusing on the stories of five children in Washington, D.C. and New York City who vie for coveted spots in privately managed charter schools, *Waiting for “Superman”* purports to expose the flaws of the public school system in the United States and the disproportionate effect its failings have on poor children in America’s inner cities. The tension hinges on whether the children featured in the film will be accepted to these charter schools via a lottery drawing or forced to attend inner-city public institutions. In addition to telling these students’ stories,

Guggenheim interviews education reform activists like Michelle Rhee, the former chancellor of Washington, D.C. public schools and founder of StudentsFirst, a lobbying organization dedicated to public school reform, and Geoffrey Canada, president and CEO of Harlem Children's Zone, a non-profit organization that runs three charter schools in New York City.

Waiting for "Superman" was greeted with nearly unanimous praise from film critics and journalists, earning a nomination for the Grand Jury Prize at the 2010 Sundance Film Festival and winning the Sundance Audience Award for Best Documentary ("2010 Sundance Film Festival Announces Awards," 2010). The American Film Institute gave *Waiting for "Superman"* a Special Award at the 2010 AFI Awards ceremony, praising Guggenheim's use of "the documentary form to shine a bright light on the dark realities of the American public school system" ("AFI Awards," 2010). Joining a chorus of positive reviews, Stephen Holden of the *New York Times* wrote, "By showing how fiercely dedicated idealists are making a difference, [the film] is a call to arms" (Holden, 2010, para. 12). Kyle Smith of the *New York Post* concluded his review of the film with a challenge for filmmakers: "Win glory for yourselves. Make a difference. Go to the poorest neighborhoods. Bribe kids to sneak cameras into school and capture bad teachers in the act. More charter schools are coming, but they can't come fast enough" (Smith, 2010, para. 3). In September 2010, Oprah Winfrey devoted an hour-long special of her afternoon talk show to a discussion of the film; a month later, President Barack Obama invited the children featured in the documentary to a special meeting at the White House (Kaufman, 2010; Tapper, 2010).

While *Waiting for "Superman"* was criticized by many—including the American Federation of Teachers, which published an open letter on its website asking if the country was "ready to settle for a good education—for the few" ("Letter to the Press: *Waiting for*

“Superman,” 2010, para. 1) and education policy analyst Diane Ravitch (2010), who called it “the most important public-relations coup that the critics of public education have made so far” (para. 28)—the film addresses serious concerns, and recent studies seem to justify Guggenheim’s anxieties. A 2012 report published by Harvard University’s Program on Education Policy and Governance revealed that American students lag behind their international peers in nearly every subject, leading its authors to warn that “a country ignores the quality of its schools at its economic peril” (p. 20). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2012), nearly 1.1 million American students drop out of public schools each year, and the dropout rate for African American and Hispanic students hovers around 40 percent. The film’s actual effects on education policy are difficult to determine, but Guggenheim certainly draws his audience’s attention to some of the real problems plaguing American public education: high dropout rates, struggling students, strained teachers, and the tremendous gap in quality between school districts in rich and poor jurisdictions. But the film’s most significant feat is how successfully it filters the argument for charter schools into public discourse by using rhetorical strategies to appeal to viewers who might not otherwise be amenable to Guggenheim’s message. The rhetorical techniques used in the film and the obfuscation of its ideological orientation are illustrative of how popular texts construct and direct public attitudes about education reform, from the K-12 level to colleges and universities.

Intertextuality, Critical Discourse Analysis, and Education Reform Discourse

Since *Waiting for “Superman”* was such a widely viewed and accepted argument for education reform, the film’s rhetorical tropes—particularly those that concern its prevalent themes of insecurity and decline—reveal key elements of K-12 education reform discourse. As my project traces the relationship between that discourse and the pro-privatization strains of

higher education discourse present in FPCU advertisements, a close analysis of the film reveals recurrent tropes—constructed via images and wordings—that “mark out identifiable systems of meaning” and are “tied to ways of knowing, believing, and categorizing the world and modes of action” (Gee, 1990, p. 15). Luke (1995) argues that texts “do not just randomly or arbitrarily proliferate”; rather, they “are all tied closely to particular social actions and interests in the contexts of particular institutions” (p. 15):

Texts connect with each other and refer to each other, sometimes systematically and sometimes unsystematically, sometimes through authorial choice and deliberation and sometimes through coincidence. All texts are made up of recurring statements: claims, propositions, and wordings. These statements recur across texts, setting up intertextual networks and webs. (Luke, 1995, p. 14)

According to Luke, texts like *Waiting for “Superman”* do not create fixed or stable meaning in the absence of other discourses. Rather, such texts are sites where contingent and situated meaning is “made and remade” (p. 14) through a dynamic relationship with various other discourses. Texts “speak to,” invoke, and depend on other texts—directly and indirectly, intentionally and unintentionally—as they create and reinforce particular meanings across different historical and situational contexts. Readers and viewers then “take up” these discourses and use them “to formulate and articulate a version of the world” (Luke, 1995, p. 14).

Drawing from the work of Kristeva (1986) and Bakhtin (1986), Fairclough (1992) describes intertextuality as a concept that “points to the productivity of texts, to how texts can transform prior texts and restructure existing conventions (genres, discourses) to generate new ones” (p. 270). However, he argues that this theory alone does not account for the “social limitations” that constrain the ability of all people to engage in “textual innovation and play” (p. 270). When viewing texts through the lens of CDA, Fairclough argues, an intertextual analytical approach “needs to be combined with a theory of power relations and how they shape (and are

shaped by) social structures and practices” (p. 271). Such power relations are reflected in which texts are circulated and who has the ability to create and distribute particular discourses. The prevalence of particular discursive strains are a result of these power relations; Luke (1995) points out that different texts and discourses have disproportionate material effects on the world, largely because the creators of certain texts have the social and political capital necessary to circulate texts that sustain discourses. Not all texts “contribute in the same way to the construction of social subjectivities or to the construal and distribution of material and symbolic resources” (Luke, 1995, p. 20). This discrepancy allows critical discourse analysts to identify particularly meaningful or effective texts and to disrupt the “common sense” they seem to create while critiquing and identifying the power structures that shape them (Fairclough, 1992). Part of that disruption, according to Luke (1995), requires the analyst to consider “the material interests particular texts and discourse might serve, how that articulation works on readers and listeners, and strategies for reinflecting and rearticulating these discourses in everyday life” (p. 20).

Luke reminds us that discourses of education reform are “mediated by a complex political economy” made up of innumerable institutions, stakeholders, and policymakers and are circulated via a variety of channels and are designed to reach different audiences. Following van Dijk’s (1997) characterization of discourse as “the medium by which ideologies are persuasively communicated in society” (p. 23), texts like advertisements and documentary films constitute significant contributions to the prevailing discourses of education that result in material effects on the lives of students in the form of public policy and the behavior of individual educational institutions. Gee (2014) argues that positions on controversial issues “that are widely known in a society or social group are often assumed to be known (and taken as part of the potentially relevant part of the context) by anyone who is engaged as a listener or reader in that society” (p.

130). In order to understand how certain “truths” about education are selected, established, and sustained, texts intended to persuade the public to accept particular positions must be analyzed in terms of the intertextuality upon which they are formulated, especially as popular texts present less arcane and more direct discursive endorsements of particular ideological orientations. Further, a consideration of the power structures responsible for creating and circulating such texts allows the analyst to understand how various discourses interact to influence public opinion.

Fairclough and Wodak (1997) argue that discourse, as a social practice, involves a “dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institutions(s), and social structure(s) which frame it” (p. 258). Thus, discourse is constitutive in the sense that it “helps to sustain and reproduce” existing realities while simultaneously being in a position to transform them (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997, p. 258). I argue that *Waiting for “Superman”* and FPCU advertisements are, as textual artifacts, representative of adjacent discourses that are historically and materially related through their mutual investment in exposing the flaws of traditional education and suggesting a more effective and efficient alternative. *Waiting for “Superman”* posits charter schools as the panacea for a failing public school system; FPCU advertisements suggest that for-profit colleges provide an educational environment where students can succeed in the absence of stifling bureaucratic limitations. These texts are designed to invoke the same anxieties and are founded upon a shared ideology: the one inaugurated by the Reagan administration’s framing of education in the *Nation at Risk* report (1983), in which tropes of the decline and failure of traditional systems of education are central to the reality created by the text. As Luke (1995) emphasized, regardless of the intentionality of the authors of these texts, the parallels between these discourses bear critical scrutiny and interpretation.

Another way of viewing the relationship between *Waiting for "Superman,"* FPCU advertisements, and *A Nation at Risk* is through Fairclough's (1992) theory of presuppositions. Though presuppositions are, in a more general sense, taken-for-granted assumptions on the part of the producer of a text, Fairclough proposes an "intertextual view" of presuppositions in which analysts "assume that presupposed propositions are a way of incorporating the texts of others" (p. 283):

In many cases of presupposition[,] the "other text" is not an individual, specified, or identifiable other text, but a more nebulous "text" corresponding to general opinion, what other people tend to say, [or] accumulated textual experience. (Fairclough, 1992, p. 283)

According to Fairclough, presuppositions may be used to manipulate audiences because they are difficult to challenge or disprove once they are entrenched as "common sense." Further, presuppositions might create a situation where the audience is unfairly "hailed" by the producer of the text: "Manipulative presuppositions postulate interpreting subjects with particular prior textual experiences and assumptions, and in doing so they contribute to the ideological constitution of subjects" (p. 283). Presuppositions serve a function similar to that of the enthymeme, a form of rhetorical syllogism in which the major premise of an argument—which Fahnestock (2011) calls the "enabling major premise" (p. 376)—is missing. In *Waiting for "Superman,"* the notion of public education's decline and the emerging need for privately funded alternatives can be inferred to be present as either a premise or the conclusion of the arguments presented in the film, as revealed by relations between its statements about education policy (p. 377).

In order to fully understand the political context in which these texts are produced, the following section outlines the ideological origins of the argument for charter schools and, by

extension, pro-privatization education reform generally, which has influenced public attitudes toward public colleges and universities.

The Political Evolution of the Charter School Argument

While the debate about education reform cannot be reduced to two monolithic views, there is a clear and long-standing distinction between liberal and conservative attitudes toward charter schools and K-12 education policy. These two competing views are sustained primarily through their linguistic framing in channels of public discourse. Traditionally, liberals believe that public schools are the most socially equitable and effective way to educate students and that more funds should be allocated to improving those schools. Although they acknowledge the reality that many of our nation's children attend failing public schools, liberals maintain the view that the "crisis" of failing public schools has been exaggerated in order to facilitate privatization efforts and that market-based solutions are not an appropriate approach to reform. In this liberal understanding, education's primary role is to help students become enlightened, empowered members of our representative form of democracy and, for the fulfillment of this mission, schools must be free of moneyed influences. Individuals who identify as politically liberal Democrats generally view public education far more favorably than their more conservative Republican counterparts, and hold that the market-based competition created by vouchers and charter schools undermines the liberal goal of improving our existing public institutions.⁴

Conversely, the conservative (and, by extension, neoliberal economic) view holds that education should serve society by preparing citizens for productive participation in the workforce

⁴ Gallup's Work and Education (2012) poll found that self-identified Democrats viewed public schools more favorably than Republicans do by 13 percentage points.

and that competition between private and public institutions enhances the quality of all schools. Conservatives favor the creation of charter schools because, Mora and Christianakis (2011) argue, these schools are in a position to operate “semi-autonomously from state educational mandates”; in the neoliberal understanding, public education is “as an economic drain linked to an unsustainable welfare state” (p. 94). From a market-oriented perspective, education is a commodity and should be traded in the free market. Because of this emphasis on competition, charter schools, which were originally envisioned in 1988 by University of Minnesota professor Ray Buddle and American Federation for Teachers President Albert Shanker as institutions where teachers would be free to use creative and innovative teaching strategies under minimal bureaucratic oversight, have become the lynchpin of conservative approaches to education reform (Ravitch, 2013). Though the first charter school opened in Minnesota in 1992, these institutions only began to proliferate in American cities after the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which allocated federal funds and created tax incentives to ensure that charter schools could serve as alternatives to underperforming public schools (Ravitch, 2013).

In recent years, however, support for charter schools among liberals has increased significantly. Polls reveal that self-identified liberals are now just as likely as conservatives to rate charter schools and private schools as providing better-quality education than public schools (Bushaw & Lopez, 2013). *Waiting for “Superman,”* a 2010 documentary film directed by Davis Guggenheim that advocates pro-privatization education reform, both reflected and intensified this shift toward a more widespread acceptance of the charter school argument by liberal audiences. As a major vehicle for filtering the argument for charter schools to a wide and diverse audience, *Waiting for “Superman”* bears closer scrutiny because it packaged neoliberal

discourses—including the narrative of the failure of public education and the need for market-based reform—in the traditionally anti-establishment, left-leaning medium of documentary film.

With its seemingly uncontroversial and ideologically neutral concern for improving our nation's public schools, *Waiting for "Superman"* makes the case for charter schools while concealing the political orientation of the market-based system it advocates. While portraying its agenda as a grassroots call to civic action—the film's official website urges visitors to sign petitions and commit to "fixing our education system"—the film represents organizations that are beholden to significant corporate interests which stand to benefit from the implementation of charter schools: According to a 2010 *New York Times* article about Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ), the non-profit charter school organization featured in *Waiting for "Superman"* "ha[s] assets of nearly \$200 million, and the project's operating budget this year is \$84 million, two-thirds of it from private donations" (Otterman, 2010, para. 16). In 2010, the Goldman Sachs Foundation donated \$20 million to HCZ for the construction of a new building (Otterman, 2010, para. 16). StudentsFirst, the organization founded by Michelle Rhee (who features prominently in the film), has received millions of dollars from conservative media mogul Rupert Murdoch and the Walton Family Foundation (Brill, 2011, p. 411). Giroux (2012) is direct in his criticism of *Waiting for "Superman"*: "On the surface, we see urgency, altruism, and political purity parading in a messianic language of educational reform and a politics of generosity. Underneath this discourse lie the same neoliberal policies that cheerfully serve corporate interests" (p. 17). Indeed, the film relies on preceding discourses that frame K-12 education reform as humanitarian efforts to "save" socioeconomically disadvantaged students.

The "political purity" performed in the film is a product of education reform discourse that obfuscates the economic interests of stakeholders. While the corporate interests fueling the

organizations in *Waiting for “Superman”* do not inherently undermine the argument for charter schools, they can, as Ravitch (2010) argues, surrender those schools “to the whim of entrepreneurs and financiers” that support them, a notion that would likely alienate liberal audiences but is left unaddressed in Guggenheim’s film (p. 13). An understanding of the rhetorical strategies that made *Waiting for “Superman”* such an effective vehicle for pro-privatization education reform discourse will help contextualize the widespread and bipartisan public acceptance of higher education reform policies and the promotional discourse of FPCUs.

Late-Twentieth-Century Public Policy and Education Reform

To understand the significance of *Waiting for “Superman”* in the current debate about education reform, we must view it as part of the broader trajectory of reform discourse, particularly the discourse that emerged from the Reagan administration’s 1983 *Nation at Risk* report. Tyack and Cuban (1995) view the history of school reform efforts as “an interaction of long-term institutional trends, transitions in society, and policy talk” that “do appear to cycle, sometimes with new labels but basically with recurrent messages” (p. 58). Indeed, many economists, scholars, and politicians have argued for market-based education reform over the past century.

In 1955, economist Milton Friedman, drawing on the ideas of economists such as Friedrich August Hayek and Simon Kuznets, argued that American education would be improved by limiting governmental involvement in the development and implementation of education policy and creating a system in which “educational services could be rendered by private enterprises operated for profit, or by non-profit institutions of various kinds” (para. 4). Nearly three decades later, *A Nation at Risk* prompted widespread demand for the privatization

of American schools and served as a rallying cry for market-based education reform initiatives, such as the implementation of charter school systems similar to the ones proposed by Friedman. According to Mehta (2013), the discursive framing of American public education in *A Nation at Risk* “launched a national school reform movement,” “powerfully... framing an agenda” and “buil[ding] a new and much larger group of stakeholders” who would direct the report’s analysis (p. 297). The report effectively established the narrative of decline that drives *Waiting for “Superman”* and still dominates the rhetoric of education reform today. Unlike the arguments for market-based reform that preceded it, *A Nation at Risk* delivered a narrative that “stuck” with the American public.

In this narrative, failing public schools are unable to prepare American children for the workforce, and bad teachers, teacher unions, and government ineptitude are standing in the way of improving American education. As I will demonstrate in more detail later in this chapter, the rhetorical tropes of insecurity and decline present in *A Nation at Risk*—its description of poorly performing American students as a danger to national security, its use of war metaphors, its appeal to nationalism and global competitiveness, and its enactment of free market ideology—are also present in *Waiting for “Superman.”* The film is a continuation of the narrative of public education and the subsequent neoliberal education reform agenda that emerged from *A Nation at Risk*. *Waiting for “Superman”* suggests that public schools have more deeply entrenched economic inequality for low-income children by forcing them to attend failing schools and advocates market-based school choice and charter schools, which, in the neoliberal view, are necessary to create the competition that will improve the entire education system. Since *Waiting for “Superman,”* other documentary films, and FPCU advertisements are examples of publicly

circulated persuasive discourse, a consideration of the genre of documentary film will shed light on the role of popular texts in shaping public attitudes about education.

Defining the New Education Documentary

Waiting for "Superman" and the other documentaries about public education released in 2010 join a long list of films that have addressed controversial social and political issues, particularly since the resurgence of the political documentary in 2004. These films and the genre from which they emerge are worthy of analysis, since they were widely distributed and viewed vehicles for education reform discourse. The genre of documentary film has been used as a tool for generating and shaping public discourse as early as the 1920s, when Russian filmmakers produced films that spread Marxist propaganda and promoted the Communist state (Benson & Snee, 2008). During World War II, many American filmmakers produced documentary films that chronicled military conflicts abroad and documented "the evolution of American society and culture" during wartime (Benson & Snee, 2008, p. 7). In the 1950s and 1960s, according to Benson and Snee (2008), "the cinema of social and political change" emerged, and filmmakers began to produce documentaries that examined a wide range of political and social issues with the intention of convincing audiences to question authority and promote activism (p. 10). Such documentaries examined issues such as the Vietnam War and the feminist and civil rights movements.

Examining what they describe as "the reemergence of the feature-length documentary film as an outlet for partisan and political messages" during the 2004 presidential campaign, Benson and Snee (2008) identify films such as Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* and Robert Greenwald's *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism* and *Uncovered: The War on Iraq*

as belonging to a category they term “the new political documentary” (p. 10-11). Benson and Snee (2008) characterize new political documentaries as the films released during the 2004 presidential campaign from both sides of the political divide that overtly endorse particular political ideologies while “experiment[ing] with a wide range of rhetorics” (p. 11). In these films, policy issues are “framed within the narrative of a person, party, or administration,” not examined or discussed in the form of a reasoned debate (Benson & Snee, 2008, p. 11). While these films did not have a quantifiable effect on the outcome of the election, the new political documentaries arguably “shaped the discourse of the [2004 presidential] campaign” (Benson & Snee, 2008, p. 16).

While the new political documentaries “do little to educate their own most partisan viewers and offer no sensible appeal to the neutral or skeptical viewer,” the education documentaries of 2010—which I will call “the new education documentaries”—employ very different persuasive strategies (Benson & Snee, 2008, p. 16). These films focus on the stories of individual children, all of whom live in poverty, most of whom represent racial minorities; filmmakers present their arguments as grassroots calls-to-arms for education reform; the films suggests that public schools are, because of political and bureaucratic failures, unfixable; the filmmakers conclude that charter schools are the best solution to America’s educational crisis; and the films appeal to audiences by advocating the indisputable good of improving American education while concealing the political agendas of their filmmakers and the financial forces supporting them. The new political documentaries do not concern themselves with winning over unreceptive audiences. The new education documentaries, however, make it a priority to appeal to anyone with a conscience.

Like the other filmmakers who produced the new education documentaries of 2010, Guggenheim understands his audience's expectations of the documentary film genre as a medium often used to challenge and critique powerful institutions and uses that expectation to rhetorically position *Waiting for "Superman"* as an insurrection against the status quo. Nichols (2010) argues that "introducing or promoting a film in a particular way can coach viewers to regard it one way rather than others," a practice that "can help filter out" competing interpretations (p. 97). Indeed, by the time *Waiting for "Superman"* was released, liberal audiences had a reason to expect a liberal perspective from Guggenheim's films. Guggenheim also directed the 2006 documentary film *An Inconvenient Truth*, which presented former Vice President Al Gore's educational campaign about the dangers of global warming. The theatrical poster for *Waiting for "Superman"* features, in large font, the line "From the Director of *An Inconvenient Truth*."⁵ In a review of the film in the *New York Times*, Gabriel (2010) calls Guggenheim a "self-described lefty" (para. 3). Along with its ostensible concern with social justice, Guggenheim's conspicuous involvement in the film positioned *Waiting for "Superman"* as an argument intended to appeal to liberal viewers.

The very medium of documentary film, which has traditionally been associated with anti-establishment perspectives, helps the filmmakers obscure the pro-privatization bent of the film; as Borda (2008) argues, the medium of documentary film "has long been the purview of leftist filmmakers" and audiences expect such films to "provide a critique of dominant institutions" (p. 57). Such genre conventions, and implicit expectations, of the documentary allow Guggenheim

⁵ *The Lottery*, another new education documentary, invokes Guggenheim to similar ends: The DVD case and theatrical poster for the film feature a quote from a *New York Daily News* review in which Errol Louis predicts that "*The Lottery* will do for charter schools what *An Inconvenient Truth* did for the environment."

to cast the public school system as the institution that must be confronted and disrupted by anti-establishment activism: In the film's official trailer, the father of a public school student in Harlem is seen marching down the street in protest holding a sign that bears the words "STATUS QUO" struck through with a red diagonal line (Participant Media, 2013). Nichols (1991) argues that documentary films are especially convincing to audiences because the discourses within such films "regard their relation to the real as direct, immediate, and transparent"; images, he argues, are compelling to audiences not because those images inherently claim "unassailable authenticity," but because they convey "the impression of authenticity" to the viewer (p. 2). Guggenheim uses both the documentary film's anti-establishment legacy and the medium's projection of apparent authenticity to make the narrative of neoliberal education reform, a narrative that began with *A Nation at Risk*, more palatable to a wider audience. I argue that *A Nation at Risk*, as the first text to employ the tropes of decline and insecurity that we see echoed in subsequent texts, was the foundation upon which both K-12 privatization efforts and FPCU marketing discourse are based.

***A Nation at Risk* and the Rhetoric of Neoliberal Education Reform**

As was the case when the new education documentaries of 2010 were released, the early 1980s were a time of economic crisis in the United States: The country was in the midst of a deep economic recession, state budgets were slashed, and Americans faced surging unemployment rates. In 1981, at the request of President Ronald Reagan, Secretary of Education Terrel Bell—who, according to Mehta (2013), was initially tasked with "find[ing] a way to eliminate his own department," formed the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE), a national commission to assess the quality of American education and set an agenda

for improving it (p. 295). Bell appointed university faculty members and administrators, state school board personnel, and other educators and policymakers to hold meetings with teachers, employers, parents, and politicians and conduct extensive research. In 1983, the “bold and ominous” report released by the commission “assailed the nation’s poor educational performance” and warned that American students would no longer be competitive in the global economy without drastic changes to the system (Mehta, 2013, p. 296). According to McIntush (2000), the report claims that “the supply of skilled workers is not keeping up with market demands” and “labels as ‘superfluous’ those courses that are not directly related to the development of marketable skills” (p. 428).

Asen (2012) notes that *A Nation at Risk*, though officially a commission report, “read as a public document aimed at a wide audience” (p. 303). The Reagan administration used the *Nation at Risk* report, which recommended significant changes to the American public school system—longer school days, higher college admissions standards, more testing for students, and “higher standards for entry into the profession” of teaching—as the justification for suggesting that the United States “end the ‘federal intrusion’ into education” (Asen, 2012, p. 303). McIntush (2000) argues that the report has shaped public discourse about education and has “set the agenda for education policy in the United States” since its publication (p. 419).

Most significantly, Asen (2012) argues, *A Nation at Risk* casts student performance as a marketable commodity, “situating education in the context of a competitive individualism” (p. 303). Straying from previous characterizations of education that emphasized the needs of individual students, Asen (2012) writes, the rhetoric of *A Nation at Risk* “exhibit[s] an economic frame” and creates “an emergent economic discourse enabling standards and outcomes” as the mechanism for gauging the effectiveness of public schools (p. 303). Once *A Nation at Risk* and

its portentous findings about American public education filtered through the Reagan administration and the media and, ultimately, into public discourse, a new narrative about public education emerged: As Mehta (2013) asserts, the report “holds that educational success is central to national, state, and individual economic success; that American schools across the board are substantially underperforming and in need of reform; that schools rather than social forces should be held responsible for academic outcomes; and that success should be measured by externally verifiable tests” (p. 286). The principles set forth in *A Nation at Risk* have, Mehta (2013) argues, “directed the school reform movement over the last 25 years, producing a variety of policy efforts that are consistent with its tenets, including charter schools, public school choice, vouchers, and... the growth of state and federal efforts to impose standards” (p. 286).

The report also prompted policymakers to seek ways to demand accountability from public school teachers and administrators. The Reagan administration’s interpretation of *A Nation at Risk* paved the way for assessment-driven education policies such as President George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which mandated that each state establish assessment criteria for its schools and impose rigorous standardized testing for its students, and President Obama’s Race to the Top program, a Department of Education initiative created in 2009 that rewards schools whose students receive high scores on standardized tests and encourages states to ease restrictions on private charter schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Because of the paradigm established by *A Nation at Risk* and subsequent policies based on its principles, current education reform efforts reflect an unprecedented acceptance of charter schools. Mora and Christianakis (2011) call Obama’s Race to the Top initiative “the most far-reaching presidential policy enacted on behalf of charter schools” (p. 94). Further, current arguments for higher education reform and the framing of traditional colleges and universities in

FPCU advertisements enact the ideology set forth in *A Nation at Risk* by summoning its ideological principles via the strategic use of certain linguistic elements.

Narrativity and *A Nation at Risk*

A productive analysis of *Waiting for "Superman"*—and, in subsequent chapters, of FPCU advertisements—must follow its relationship with the rhetoric of *A Nation at Risk* and the narrative of public education that emerged from the report. Fisher (1987) argues that in public discourse, “knowledge is ultimately configured narratively, as a component in a larger story implying the being of a certain kind of person, a person with a particular worldview, with a specific self-concept, and with characteristic ways of relating to others” (p. 17). Narratives, then, are “moral constructs”; as White (1980) writes in “The Value of Narrativity,” “where, in any account of reality, narrativity is present, we can be sure that morality or a moral impulse is present too” (p. 7). Thus, essential to narrative criticism is an inquiry into motivation and the “moral impulse” that prompts persuasive public discourse. Narrative rationality, Fisher (1987) argues, is based on “the values of coherence, truthfulness, wisdom, and humane action” instead of expertise and technical logic (p. 67). As opposed to other rhetorical logics, which are inherently exclusive because they create a “hierarchy based on the assumption that some people are qualified to be rational and others are not,” the narrative paradigm holds that “the ‘people’ judge the stories that are told for and about them and have a rational capacity to make such judgments” (p. 67). People have a natural capacity for storytelling and for understanding narrative constructions (according to Fisher [1987], we are “storytelling animals”), and we “have a natural tendency to prefer what they perceive as the true and the just” (p. 66). Fisher (1987) specifies narrative rationality as essentially “descriptive,” since it “offers an account, an

understanding, of any instance of human choice and action” (p. 66). Given this innate human ability to distinguish between plausible and implausible stories, the narrative paradigm has obvious democratizing implications for public discourse.

The public’s general tendency to prefer “true and just” narratives, however, does not preclude the possibility that dominant groups can systematically promulgate certain narratives over sustained periods of time, thus influencing the direction of public discourse about particular issues. If a narrative is judged by the public as true by virtue of its perceived soundness, then authorship of the narrative can eventually be shifted away from those who created it. Mehta (2013) argues that *A Nation at Risk* significantly influenced public discourse because it “[told] a powerful story of decline that resonated with policymakers and the public” (p. 90). While other reports about the state of public education merely presented data, *A Nation at Risk* “contained an identifiable narrative that made it memorable [...] a story of decline and fall” (Mehta, 2013, p. 90). Opposing views never gained comparable traction with the public because “critics were never able to offer an equally convincing counternarrative that would tie together their assorted criticisms into a compelling story” (Mehta, 2013, p. 91). The report’s narrative of decline still serves as the framework for market-based education reform arguments.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, within the genre of documentary film, the authenticity of the narratives presented is a foregone conclusion. Thus, the narratives of individual children in the film sustain the larger narrative of decline initiated by *A Nation at Risk*. From the perspective of critical discourse analysis, Mumby and Clair (1997) argue that storytelling serves an ideological function in four different ways: “(1) through representing sectional interests as universal; (2) by obscuring or transforming structural contradictions; (3) through the process of reification [that is, making human constructions seem natural and

objective]; and (4) as a means of control, or hegemony” (p. 187-188). Thus, the stories within the film do not function as objective representations of reality; instead, as discursive practices, they are persuasive devices that only become meaningful within the context of the larger narrative of the film insofar as they support its attendant ideological underpinnings.

Waiting for “Superman,” a significant contribution to the argument for charter schools, presents four topoi that reflect its embedded neoliberal narrative about public education, all of which also appear in *A Nation at Risk* and which are examined more closely in the following sections of this chapter: (1) the suggestion that public schools have already failed and cannot be fixed; (2) the use of war metaphors, warnings of an impending national crisis, and appeals to American nationalism; (3) the use of free market rhetoric; and (4) an emphasis on America’s inability to compete with students from other countries.

The Foregone Failure of Public Schools

In 1993, John Hood of the Federation for Economic Education—which calls itself “one of the oldest free-market organizations in the United States”—made a decisive declaration: “Public education is itself a failure.” The argument that public schools have already failed and that the system must be uprooted and replaced with market-based alternatives is a central component of neoliberal education policies. In his 1983 essay “A Neoliberal’s Manifesto,” Charles Peters argued that “urban public schools have in fact become the principal instrument of class oppression in America,” forcing low-income families to send their children to failing public schools while “the upper class sends its children to private schools” (p. 10). During his 1984 State of the Union address, Reagan said, “Just as more incentives are needed within our schools, greater competition is needed among our schools. Without standards and competition, there can be no champions, no records broken, no excellence in education or any other walk of life”

(Reagan, 1984). A non-market-based education system is, in the neoliberal view, incapable of creating the competition necessary for good schools to thrive.

That inner-city public schools have failed is, at the outset of *Waiting for "Superman,"* a foregone conclusion; in the film's opening scene, Guggenheim interviews Anthony, an African American student in the fifth grade at an unnamed public school in Washington, D.C. Anthony sits on his bed while Guggenheim, who is off-camera, asks him a math question: "If I have four cookies and I ate two of them, what portion did I eat?" Anthony struggles to answer: "You have four cookies and you ate two. You have to cross-multiply. Four, two... Wait." He looks into the distance and draws numbers in the air with his finger. "Four, two, twenty... You ate... You ate fifty percent of your cookies." Anthony has answered Guggenheim's question correctly, but with too much difficulty; as he smiles proudly, melancholy music swells and the scene fades to footage from the 1950s television show *Adventures of Superman* in which actor George Reeves, dressed as the superhero, stands resolutely before a waving American flag. Over this image, Geoffrey Canada, president and CEO of Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ), narrates:

One of the saddest days of my life was when my mother told me Superman did not exist. I loved comic books... 'cause even in the depths of the ghetto, you just thought, He's coming, I just don't know when, because he always shows up, and he saves all the good people, and they never end up... I was reading, I don't know, maybe I was in the fourth grade, fifth grade, my mother, I was like, You know, Ma, you think Superman is up there? She said, "Superman's not real." And I was crying because there was no one coming with enough power to save us.

As Canada speaks, the image of Superman switches, again, to footage of a decrepit street in Harlem and then to a photograph of Canada as a young boy in which he looks strikingly similar to young Anthony. We then see Canada seated at the front of what appears to be classroom. The caption that identifies him reads: "Geoffrey Canada – Educator." We then see a brief, slow-motion scene of George Reeves, as Superman, striking a man in the face with his fist.

Within these scenes—which comprise the first two minutes of the film—Guggenheim establishes the moral exigency of education reform. A young African American boy, alone in his room so as to appear abandoned, struggles to solve a simple math problem. Then Superman, a nostalgic symbol of American power, appears as a stand-in for whatever interests could save Anthony from his hardship. Canada is identified only as an “educator” who, like Anthony, is African American and grew up in an economically underprivileged neighborhood. Only later in the film does the audience learn that Canada is involved in Harlem Children’s Zone; Guggenheim does not address the relationship between HCZ and pro-privatization education reformers. Guggenheim’s decision to introduce Canada only as an “educator” during the film’s introduction has a strategic function: Canada’s credibility is based on the parallel between his life and Anthony’s, which means he can speak about poverty and the state of public education with authority.

Later in the film, Canada explains his experiences with education and his reasons for becoming involved in education reform. He tells Guggenheim, “Now, I grew up in the South Bronx in the ’50s. The school that I was supposed to go to was Morris High School [a public school]. If I had gone to Morris High School, I would not be sitting here today. It was a horrible school. It was a failure factory.” Canada does not go into any more detail about the “failure factory” he narrowly avoided attending, though Morris High School counts former Secretary of State Colin Powell and civil rights activist and scholar Vincent Harding among its alumni. He then explains that he attended the Harvard Graduate School of Education and decided, after graduation, “to straighten out education in the nation.” He continues: “I read the papers. I understood, you know, what was going on. I figured I could have this whole thing straightened out. And then I ran into this system. You could not find the sort of architects of why [*sic*] this

thing was as bad as it was, and yet nobody seemed to be willing to really look at this and say, ‘This thing is an utter failure.’” Canada, without explaining his contempt for Morris High School or the education system, labels the “system”—a nebulous term rendered even more abstract by his use of referents like “this” and “this thing”—an “utter failure.” Within the logic of neoliberal education reform arguments, Canada’s assertion needs no justification.

Guggenheim’s treatment of public schools, in which he does not specify what suggests that public schools are failing and avoids details about the schools themselves, continues when he introduces Francisco, a first-grade student at an unidentified public school in Bronx, New York. Guggenheim asks Francisco’s mother, Maria, to describe the public school her son attends. She replies: “Um, walking in, you’ll see a desk with a security guard. That’s it. You can’t go no further than that.” As Maria speaks, we see Francisco walking down the hallways of his school. “They’re in the district that’s the third-largest overcrowded school in the Bronx.” We then see Francisco drawing pictures while seated on the floor in a squalid, otherwise-empty classroom while Maria narrates, “Public education, you know, that’s the only option we have.”

These are the first images we see of public schools in the film. The school is crowded with children in the first image, and Francisco looks pitiable and neglected in the second. Guggenheim represents the school so selectively and gives the audience such scant information about it that the implicit narrative of the decline of public schools becomes the vehicle for Francisco’s story. Viewers do not see the bad teacher, but they can assume his or her presence; viewers do not see the union supporting that bad teacher, but they can assume its influence; viewers do not hear the lessons given during Francisco’s classes, but they can assume those lessons lack rigor and substance.

Guggenheim—in apt capitalist terms—leverages the narrative of decline against the assumed egalitarian values of socially progressive liberal viewers. Early in the film, Guggenheim frames his contention that public schools have failed with claims about his own belief in the system’s value and potential. He narrates over images of students eating breakfast and heading to school: “Every morning, it’s the same. Juice, shoes, backpack. The morning ritual. And with it comes the uneasy feeling: No matter who we are, or what neighborhood we live in, each morning, wanting to believe in our schools, we take a leap of faith.” He then explains that, in 1999, he made a documentary film (*The First Year*) about public school teachers who “embodied a hope and carried a promise that public school could work.” But when it was time for him to choose a school for his own children, he says, “Reality set in. My feelings about public education didn’t matter as much as my fear of sending them to a failing school.” As Guggenheim narrates, we see him behind the wheel of his car. “So every morning... I drive past three public schools as I take my kids to a private school. But I’m lucky. I have a choice.” From inside Guggenheim’s car, the audience sees housing projects and impoverished inner-city neighborhoods, an image that invokes the trope of the decline and decay of public education.

As Terrill (2000) writes, viewers of documentary films are expected to “attend to rational assertions” while viewing “aesthetic resources designed to provoke an emotional response” (p. 133). Documentary films, he argues, rely “on an audience who is actively engaged in judgment and action”; the audience is “encouraged... to assess possibilities of action and judgment through interpretive work” (Terrill, 2000, p. 133). Such is the case in the opening scenes from *Waiting for “Superman,”* during which audiences must interpret the relationship between the characters Guggenheim introduces, the story he tells, and the images he presents. Guggenheim explicitly characterizes his understanding of education as “reality” and, as Nichols (1991) argues, images

in documentary films lend the “impression of authenticity” (p. 2). Thus, Guggenheim does not persuade the audience to accept the idea that public schools have failed; rather, these scenes summon the neoliberal narrative of education and its concomitant framing of public education as a failed system. In case his audience is resistant to that idea, Guggenheim appeals to his belief in the “promise that public school could work.” Guggenheim can advocate charter schools to liberal audiences by admitting that he must abandon his own ideals about public education to accept that the charter school system is a last resort. With a crisis this urgent, Guggenheim argues, viewers simply cannot afford to cling to ideals. Rather, his audience must consider what will *work*.

War Metaphors and Nationalism

Throughout the film, tropes of economic insecurity are piled upon the aforementioned tropes of decline. Central to the narrative of public education’s decline are fears about the United States’ standing in the global economy and our students’ ability to compete with students from other countries. McIntush (2000) notes that from the opening page of the report, *A Nation at Risk*, the narrative “is filled with war metaphors which tap into the audience’s fear of war and sense of competitive nationalism” (p. 426). Citing Lakoff and Johnson (1980), McIntush argues that metaphors function persuasively by “providing a focus and perspective” and giving us “a way to understand our world” (p. 426). She gives several examples from *A Nation at Risk*: the authors of the report argue that, had “an unfriendly foreign power... attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war” (p. 427). By allowing a substandard education system to exist in the United States, the authors argue, the United States is jeopardizing its economic and political dominance in the global economy, “committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament,” and, thus, endangering the safety of its citizens; in this configuration, “a poor education system is

literally imperiling national security” (p. 434). This strategy helped charter school advocates establish moral exigency for their agenda of freeing education from oppressive bureaucratic oversight.

Guggenheim uses a similar technique in *Waiting for “Superman,”* in which war metaphors are invoked and images of poverty-stricken inner cities represent the economic failure that will befall the whole country if reform is not achieved. The theatrical poster for the film features a young girl dressed in a school uniform and seated at a desk, raising her hand and smiling eagerly. She is bathed in the warm, orange glow of a spotlight, but her desk sits amidst a hellish, post-apocalyptic wasteland, littered with fractured chalkboards, chunks of concrete, and snarls of rusted rebar. The tagline reads: “The fate of our country won’t be decided on a battlefield, [sic] it will be determined in a classroom.” The militaristic tenor of the film’s marketing continued when Michelle Rhee appeared on *Oprah* in September 2010: The show’s producers introduced Rhee as “the warrior woman [who] won’t back down.” In a way that evokes what McIntush (2000) calls the “aura of impending doom” of *A Nation at Risk* that “gave education reform extreme urgency,” the trailer for *Waiting for “Superman”* describes the film as one that reveals “a system that’s broken, the people trying to fix it, and the kids whose lives hang in the balance.” The struggle for school reform is described as “a fight” and “a battle,” and, as the film’s title suggests, children in public schools are the refugees of this conflict. Guggenheim portrays urban neighborhoods as the site of this “battle”; we do not see public schools themselves, but images of the poverty-stricken, neglected urban wasteland from which poor children must be rescued. The shots of Harlem in the film include images of abandoned, crumbling government housing projects that resemble the aftermath of war. These images of poverty also represent the economic collapse that will befall the country if our education system

is allowed to fail. Again, Guggenheim's message is that the crisis is so immediate and so dire that it would be dangerous to cling to ideals instead of exploring solutions.

Investments and Results: The Rhetoric of the Free Market

Guggenheim, viewing education through the same economic frame as the authors of *A Nation at Risk*, emphasizes the importance of student achievement because of education's market value. The narrative of education and our understanding of its role have shifted dramatically throughout our nation's history. According to McIntush (2000), education has been viewed as "a tool for nation-building, the incorporation of new citizens, international competition, and as a civil right," depending upon the sociopolitical climate of the times. In essence, public education is a screen onto which our national priorities are projected (p. 434). As Tyack and Cuban (1995) note, "For over a century and a half, Americans have translated their cultural anxieties and hopes into dramatic demands for education reform" (p. 1). *A Nation at Risk* and the new education documentaries were produced during economic recessions and reflect national anxieties about the American economy. Thus, the report and the films cast education as both the scapegoat and the potential panacea for economic crisis.

In *Selling the Free Market: The Rhetoric of Economic Correctness*, Aune (2001) outlines the rhetorical strategies that enable free market advocates to frame issues of public policy in economic terms: defining people, institutions, and relationships as commodities; foregrounding the failure of well-intentioned social programs; and enacting "a sense of disinterested objectivity" (p. 36-37). Guggenheim uses these strategies in the film to argue that our nation's financial investment in public education has yielded disappointing results. Immediately following Geoffrey Canada's aforementioned claim that the public education system "is an utter

failure,” Guggenheim presents a montage, accompanied by upbeat, playful music, of former American presidents—Bill Clinton, George H. W. Bush, Lyndon Johnson, George W. Bush, and Gerald Ford—making speeches about their commitment to improving education in the United States. The montage implies that these politicians—who, significantly, represent both sides of the political aisle—left their promises unfulfilled. He then explains that government spending on education has “skyrocketed” over the past thirty years, but that the increased expenditure is “worth it if we’re producing better results. Unfortunately, we’re not.” To support this contention, Guggenheim explains that test scores have either leveled off or declined since the 1970s; he presents a chart labeled “Student Test Scores” to illustrate this point. What remains unspecified, though, is any salient information about the scores the chart represents: what test the data refers to, what students and schools were represented in the sample, or which subjects were tested. The scores are attributed to the United States Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences and are said to refer to “average 17-year-old scale scores.”

More significant than the vagueness of the chart, though, is Guggenheim’s use of test scores as his sole barometer for measuring “results.” In arguments for privatization, the terms “results” and “performance” often serve as the crux of calls for reform, but what they refer to in the context of education is unclear. While the use of standardized tests and other measurable, quantitative data as the criteria for judging the performance of schools is outside of the purview of this analysis, the language used to deliver the neoliberal argument for reform is relevant to an understanding of *Waiting for “Superman.”* The free-market rhetoric Aune (2001) describes is present in Guggenheim’s discussion of test scores. Guggenheim foregrounds the failed institution of public education and the apparent ineffectiveness of government-based initiatives without scrutinizing the basis on which those initiatives have been determined as failures. Further,

Guggenheim commodifies the social institution of public schools by directly invoking the language and logic of the free market in his critique through words such as “investment” and “results.” As Weathers (2007) contends, neoliberal calls for education reform often absorb the vocabulary of the free market; the “discursive moves employed by the individual representing the pro-privatization view go beyond attempts to improve school efficiency and performance to the colonization of democratic discourse, infiltrating it with the relatively simple logic of the marketplace (p. 70). Education is expressed in the practical terms of its economic utility, which reduces a conversation about an extremely complex and nuanced issue to a straightforward cost-benefit analysis. Taxpayers’ collective “investment” in education, Guggenheim argues, is so significant that education should yield tangible, measurable benefits. Even the “Student Scores” graphic, with its snaking green and blue lines, resembles a stock chart demonstrating the stagnant value of a commodity. Once Guggenheim renders the apparent failure of public schools as a quantifiable certainty, his audience is more receptive to the idea of a simple, market-based solution.

Guggenheim furthers this characterization of public education as a mismanaged economic commodity later in the film when he interviews Nakia, the mother of a Harlem kindergarten student named Bianca. Nakia explains that she works several jobs to ensure that she can pay Bianca’s \$500-a-month private-school tuition: “I don’t care what I have to do. I don’t care how many jobs I have to obtain, but [Bianca] will go to college. There’s just no second-guessing on that one.” Guggenheim then returns to his interview with Canada, who says, “Kids look at the world and make certain predictions based on the evidence they are receiving from their peers, from their parents, and from their teachers.” At this point, shots of squalid city blocks in Harlem appear on-screen as Canada speaks, again invoking the trope of decline. “From their

perspective, the world is a heartless, cold-blooded place because they realize they've been given the short end of the stick, and they don't know why." We then see Bianca reading aloud from Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree*: "Take my apples, boy, and sell them in the city. Then you will have money and you will be happy." The excerpt that Bianca reads is telling: Nakia's concerns about Bianca suggest that her daughter would be unable to attend college and pursue a well-paying job if she were enrolled in a public school. Bianca's education, in the analogy Guggenheim creates, is the commodity that could be "sold"; if her education is of high enough quality, we assume, then someday Bianca "will have money and [she] will be happy."

The object of this analysis is not to question, undermine, or dismiss the aspirations of parents like Nakia to secure a path toward higher education for their children. The aim here is to draw attention to the axiom Guggenheim invokes through Bianca's narrative: Public schools deprive poor and minority students of the ability to attend college and, by extension, to have careers. Instead of a discussion about what other social and economic obstacles might prevent Bianca from being successful, the film offers conjecture: Because Bianca attends a private school, she will be successful in the future. The type of school that Bianca attends is advanced as the only variable that will affect her success.

Global Competition

The configuration of education as a market-based problem is also influenced by the idea that American students are no longer competitive in the global economy because of the downfall of American public education. In *Waiting for "Superman,"* Guggenheim discusses young Daisy's "path to medical school" and the rigorous academic road that lies before her. While the audience sees aerial images of downtown Los Angeles, Guggenheim narrates: "Stevenson feeds

into Roosevelt, one of the worst performing high schools in Los Angeles.” We then see Lester Garcia, the executive director of the Boyle Heights Learning Collaborative, who says: “The way that the California public university system is set up is there’s a set of, uh, fifteen courses called the A through G that you have to meet in order to be accepted into a four-year university.” Guggenheim adds: “Only three out of a hundred students at Roosevelt will graduate with the classes necessary for admission to a four-year university. And 57 percent of Daisy’s classmates won’t graduate.” As Guggenheim speaks, we see images of Daisy and her classmates racing toward the finish line: a rope held up by an adult’s hand.

Guggenheim presents Daisy’s narrative in a way that the audience is assumed to know what the outcome of her story will be if she attends public schools: She will underperform in math and science at Stevenson, attend Roosevelt, and be unable to attend a public university in California, and her future failures can be pinned on the deficient public school system. The audience is left to assume that the rope that Daisy and her classmates run toward, which represents the indeterminate “finish line” of education, will never be reached; moreover, as the neoliberal reform narrative emphasizes, these children will undoubtedly be “outrun” by more competitive students from foreign countries in the global economy. The film makes frequent references to the idea that American students are consistently “outperformed” by students from other countries.

Ultimately, the film’s prevailing tropes of decline, failure, and economic insecurity build a rhetorical platform upon which Guggenheim can offer a solution to the problems plaguing public education: privately managed, federally funded charter schools. Similarly, in their promotional discourse, FPCUs must first suggest that traditional colleges and universities belong to an outdated, inefficient, and failing educational system before positioning themselves as the

radical alternative to that system. While these texts are not explicitly related, they represent a shared ideological orientation emblemized by what I argue is their common discursive ancestor: *A Nation at Risk*, which first crystallized the argument that America's public education system is failing. The parallels between these texts, embodied in their "lexical and grammatical configurations," allow us to "systematically trace" these discourses to "larger ideological and social formations" (Luke, 1995, p. 17).

Conclusion

Hlavacik (2012), in an analysis of Margaret Haley's 1904 speech "Why Teachers Should Organize"—the address that was "the first call for a national effort to unionize U.S. classroom teachers"—notes that Haley built her argument for teacher unions upon the tenets of the progressive labor movement and the Deweyan idea that "the relationship between democracy and education is the core justification for public education in the United States" (p. 499). Public education, in this view, bears the responsibility of "publicly uphold[ing] the 'democratic ideal'" (p. 505). Haley, an organizer and activist, "identified democracy as her guiding social ethic" and emphasized the "indispensable role of democracy in education" (p. 509). Current education reform efforts reflect a very different understanding of the role of education: to prepare students to represent the United States as it competes with other nations for dominance of the global economy.

If *A Nation at Risk* effectively defined public education as a time bomb, we can still hear it ticking in current reform efforts. *Waiting for "Superman"* and the other new education documentaries of 2010 demonstrate not only the remarkable potency and longevity of the report's narrative, but the way in which reform efforts—which are political by nature—are now

camouflaged as urgent, apolitical cries for social justice. The growing enthusiasm about charter schools from the political left stems, in part, from arguments for market-based reform that are delivered to liberal audiences through popular culture. As a result, charter schools are now endorsed by groups on both sides of the political aisle; the system appeals to liberal audiences because of its ostensible concern for equality and social justice, and to conservative audiences because of its seemingly logical goal of market-based competition.

Defenders of public education who oppose market-oriented reform efforts are now drowned out by the false consensus projected in both political discourse and popular culture. Within this putative consensus, free-market rhetoric and ideology are promoted through the strategic use of two powerful—if negative—types of tropes: those foregrounding notions of insecurity and decline. As the education reform debate is increasingly informed by pro-privatization documentary films like *Waiting for “Superman”* and recent books like director M. Night Shyamalan's *I Got Schooled: The Unlikely Story of How a Moonlighting Movie Maker Learned the Five Keys to Closing America's Education Gap* (2013) that advocate the creation of charter schools, we must more closely examine the rhetoric of popular texts and their influence on public discourse. In order to further guard ourselves from the facile representations that the “new education documentaries” have contributed to the complex issue of public education, rhetorical analyses of popular texts about education should be scrutinized with the political and economic agendas of their authors in mind.

The same strains of public discourse that have shaped debates about education reform have influenced public attitudes toward higher education. FPCU advertisements, both overtly and through subtle visual and textual references, invoke audiences’ understanding and acceptance of preceding discourses that cast traditional education as a flawed and inefficient

system. In order to demonstrate the relationship between these discourses, the following chapter presents an analysis of the promotional discourse in FPCU advertisements.

Chapter Three

The Promotional Discourse of FPCUs

The Marketplace of Higher Education

In early 2014, the nonprofit research organization Public Agenda published the results of a survey of hundreds of prospective and current students at FPCUs, as well as alumni of these institutions. Public Agenda's report, "Profiting Higher Education?: What Students, Alumni, and Employers Think About For-Profit Colleges," presented survey data collected from 197 current undergraduate students at FPCUs, 249 alumni of FPCUs, and 803 adults who were, at the time of the survey, considering enrolling in classes at FPCUs. When asked by the nonprofit organization whether advertising influenced their interest in for-profit institutions, 64 percent of prospective FPCU students reported that they had learned about the FPCU they would like to attend through television commercials, billboards, or online advertisements (Hagelskamp, Schleifer, and DiStasi, 2014). The authors of the Public Agenda report come to a debatable conclusion about the powerful role advertising plays in recruiting potential FPCU students: Traditional universities might need to adjust their advertising strategies in order to "level the playing field of higher education marketing" (p. 30). The authors explain:

Currently, for-profit institutions dominate the higher education advertisement arena. For prospective students to be exposed to a broader range of information and choices, not-for-profit schools may need to develop smart ways to communicate through advertising. (Hagelskamp, Schleifer, and DiStasi, 2014, p. 30)

Implicit in this conclusion is the suggestion that FPCUs are "smarter" about communicating their messages to prospective students. Instead of recommending that the administrators of not-for-profit colleges and universities attempt to counter the (often deceptive) promotional discourse of FPCUs or scrutinize the role of their own advertisements in the recruitment of prospective

students, Public Agenda proposes that other types of institutions market themselves more aggressively or make more strategic appeals to their target demographics.

However, the administrators of traditional colleges and universities seem to agree with Public Agenda's conclusion that marketing is, for institutions of higher education, an increasingly important endeavor. Within the last ten years, many traditional colleges and universities have created positions for marketing and advertising officers, a trend the *Wall Street Journal* called "the biggest shift in higher-education administration in the past decade," one that "blur[s] the lines between academia and the corporate world" (Glazer & Korn, 2012). In 2013, Northwestern University hired alumna Mary Baglivo as the university's first vice president of global marketing and chief marketing officer (CMO). When asked about her goals in the new position, she replied:

Northwestern has never had a CMO. So first it really is about developing a compelling and cohesive brand position for the university. Once that is articulated, then it would be operationalized throughout all aspects—the student experience, student communications, [and] potential donors. My role is not just a marketing-communications or advertising role. Fundamentally, what the brand beliefs are and position is has to be alive in everything, for students, parents, faculty and alumni. ("Why Higher Education Needs Marketing," 2013)

Also in 2013, the University of South Florida hired its first CMO: Tom Hoof, who previously served as the Vice President of Marketing for the Tampa Bay Rays, a Major League Baseball team. The next year, Lynn University, a private, not-for-profit university in Boca Raton, Florida, hired Sherrie Weldon as its first CMO. In a press release about her new position, Weldon said, "Lynn is an entrepreneurial institution. We are transforming the way universities teach and students learn, and our brand needs to reflect that innovation to more effectively tell our story" ("Lynn University," 2014).

The language Baglivo and Weldon use to describe their roles—emphasizing the “brand,” “brand position,” “and “brand beliefs” of their respective universities—demonstrates how thoroughly many American universities have embraced the idea that higher education, like any other consumer commodity or service, can be packaged, marketed, and sold to prospective students. Tellingly, Baglivo and Weldon both suggest that the “brands” of these institutions must be built using corporate marketing strategies to establish their public identities. Baglivo mentions the need to build “a compelling and cohesive” identity for the institution, while Weldon says that Lynn must “more effectively tell [the university’s] story” (“Lynn University,” 2014). The market ideology reflected in this language suggests, according to Fabricant and Fine (2013), that universities are positioning themselves to “be remade in the image of the corporation, thus emphasizing measures of productivity, efficiency, and outcome” (p. 24). Further, Baglivo and Weldon’s responses reflect an understanding of the power of narrative constructions to communicate institutional ideologies (as discussed in Chapter 2), given audience members’ innate abilities to understand the world through storytelling.

Within a corporation, productivity, efficiency, and outcome refer to the effective management of resources to maximize profit. While those measures are central to the goals of businesses, they assume different significance when applied to traditionally democratic institutions like education. They invoke a set of values such as profitability, marketability, and consumer appeal that carry particular socio-cultural norms and entail a number of capitalistic and industrial discourses, which are rhetorically foreign to the stated goals of traditional, not-for-profit institutions of higher education as spaces for fostering critical thinking and preparing students for informed, empowered participation in a democratic society.

Ayers (2005) argues that, as higher education becomes increasingly geared toward meeting measures of economic success, “the discourse of education for participation and leadership in a democratic society is overtaken by the economic discourse of production and consumerism” (p. 4). Baglivo and Weldon, by using terms that conventionally belong to the economic discourse of corporations, rhetorically construct the university as an institution whose value can be determined by how well it mimics a successful business. In their endorsements of corporate marketing strategies, Baglivo and Weldon indicate that in order for universities to meet corporate standards of success, nothing about the universities themselves must change; rather, the institutions must do a better job of articulating themselves to prospective students. This proposed shaping (and re-shaping) of a university’s “brand identity” is a fundamentally rhetorical act, one done entirely through storytelling and the strategic use of persuasive language.

As this capitalistic rhetoric pervades the discourse of higher education, institutions absorb the values of business culture and reorient themselves as spaces where, as Giroux (2011) argues, “anything that cannot be quantified, measured, and consumed to generate profit is viewed as useless” (p. 65). As discussed in Chapter 1, in a constructivist view, discourse formulates social reality, a theory that accounts for how institutions that adopt a particular way of speaking inevitably embrace and reflect the values embedded in the phrases they use. Within the ideological paradigm constructed by this discourse, academic courses and fields of study that fail to demonstrate their economic value are threatened, and—especially during a time of economic instability and high unemployment—institutions must advertise themselves as purveyors of a valuable good: a marketable college degree. However, as many colleges and universities engage in more aggressive advertising and marketing strategies, they simultaneously raise tuition rates and enroll more students: Between 2000 and 2010, full-time undergraduate enrollment increased

by 45 percent, while undergraduate tuition, room, and board at public institutions rose by 40 percent during that same ten-year period (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Thus, as colleges and universities embrace corporate values in their public discourse and enact corporate culture in their behavior, they recruit greater numbers of students and put students who enroll at greater financial risk.

While many traditional colleges and universities have marketing departments, FPCUs were the trailblazers of “selling” higher education. As publicly traded companies that are beholden to stockholders and designed to maximize revenue, for-profit education companies need to demonstrate growing student enrollment. Unlike traditional colleges and universities, which must usually attract students to physical campuses⁶, FPCUs offer any student, no matter where the student lives, the opportunity to pursue a college degree. Because they have virtually no academic prerequisites for admission, FPCUs like the University of Phoenix have a much larger pool of prospective students. Accordingly, FPCU advertisements are omnipresent on television, in print and billboard advertisements, and on the internet. In 2012, the University of Phoenix paid more for advertisements on Google than any other client, spending an average of \$200,000 per day for their advertisements to appear on the search engine. According to a 2012 Senate committee report, the average FPCU spends about 22.4% of its revenue on marketing and only 18% on instruction (Lewin, 2012). In defense of this seemingly disproportionate allocation of funds within FPCUs, Steve Gunderson, the President and CEO of the Association of Private Sector Colleges and Universities, said:

⁶ Many traditional colleges and universities now offer online degrees, regardless of where a student lives in relation to the institution’s physical campus. However, these programs have stricter admissions criteria, cost significantly less than degree programs at FPCUs, and are not widely marketed.

[U]nlike traditional colleges and universities, we serve a wide-ranging student demographic who do not get their information from guidance counselors and college advisors.⁷ Instead, we need to reach them where they are, and that means utilizing more traditional means of marketing and advertising so that working men and women can learn about the educational opportunities we offer. (Kingkade, 2012)

Because their advertisements are, by design, so pervasive and reflective of the capitalistic rhetoric of higher education, FPCUs offer a rich source of data for analyzing the role of language and rhetoric in constructing and circulating the “reality” of higher education. To that end, this chapter presents analyses of five FPCU advertisements through what has been argued in chapter one as two complementary theoretical lenses: discourse analysis, or the role of language in the social construction of reality, and rhetorical analysis, or the persuasive strategies used to “sell” institutions to students. Specifically, the analyses of these advertisements join intertextuality and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), a theoretical orientation that allows for the interpretation of broad, historically situated strains of public discourse, with narrative rhetorical analysis, which considers the persuasive effect of storytelling. To further bridge these two theories, these analyses incorporate speech act theory, or the study of “how language is used to perform actions” and “how meaning and action are related to language” (Schiffrin, 1994, p. 50). Speech act theory is particularly useful insofar as it can be applied as a theoretical lens in both CDA and rhetorical analysis.

Beyond the types of advertisements analyzed in this chapter, FPCUs are aggressive in their attempts to directly recruit students. These student recruitment strategies are illustrated in internal training documents that have been either released during government investigations or leaked by former employees of FPCUs. Enrollment counselors—who I will refer to as

⁷ Here, Gunderson makes a telling rhetorical move: He posits FPCUs as populist institutions that reach an underserved and marginalized student population. As I will argue in depth later in this chapter, this technique pervades advertisements for FPCUs.

“recruiters” in this project— interact with students in a variety of settings: in person during college fairs and on physical FPCU campuses, on the phone during unsolicited “sales calls” or when prospective students call toll-free numbers, and on the Internet when prospective students initiate informational chat sessions. Before restrictions were imposed on colleges that violated the law by engaging in deceptive recruiting tactics, training documents, interviews with former employees, and company e-mails reveal that recruiters engaged in discursive practices that are not present in FPCU advertisements. In order to present a holistic view of the promotional discourse of FPCUs, this chapter presents analyses of training documents and transcripts of undercover applicants’ videotaped meetings with FPCU recruiters—artifacts that represent the persuasive strategies used by FPCU recruiters.

Intertextuality and Audience Reception

As discussed in Chapter 2, intertextual analysis “shows how texts selectively draw upon *orders of discourse*—the particular configurations of conventionalized practices (genres, discourses, narratives, etc.) which are available to text producers and interpreters in particular social circumstances” (Fairclough, 1992, p. 194, emphasis in original). Unlike linguistic analysis, in which the analyst demonstrates how texts incorporate particular linguistic elements, an intertextual approach considers the “insertion of history (society) into a text and of this text into history” (Kristeva, 1986, p. 39). Fairclough (1992), extolling the breadth of contextual considerations that intertextuality allows, proposes that intertextuality serve as the intermediary in a “three-dimensional framework for discourse analysis,” arguing that in this configuration, intertextuality “crucially mediates the connection between language and social context, and facilitates more satisfactory bridging of the gap between texts and contexts” (p. 195). This notion

of intertextuality and its role in CDA guides my study of the relationship between preceding and adjacent public discourses of K-12 education reform discourse and FPCU advertisements. In February 2015, Wisconsin governor Scott Walker proposed that the University of Wisconsin System remove the phrase “Basic to every purpose of the system is the search for the truth” from its mission statement and replace it with “Basic to every purpose of the system is to meet the state’s workforce needs” (Herzog). Walker’s attempt to change the U’s motto exemplifies the variety of ways and means by which the discourse promoting the relationship between industry and higher education is reinforced and, indeed, constructed. As I have demonstrated in preceding chapters, the idea that the primary purpose of the university is to serve the economic function of preparing students for the workforce is prevalent in a number of preceding discourses of education, including documents like *A Nation at Risk*, legislation like No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, and media like *Waiting for “Superman”* and FPCU advertisements. The relationship between the ideologies in these texts can be traced through a focus on intertextuality and the presence of certain ideas as they are reflected in linguistic features that appear across texts.

An ostensible pitfall of such an analysis is the tendency of discourse analysts to make assumptions about how the audience for texts like advertisements will understand and respond to them. Sheyholislami (1994) argues that “discourse analysts naturally make assumptions about how audiences read and comprehend texts. [Analysts] even appear to interpret texts on behalf of the audiences” (p. 12). As I discussed in chapter 2, texts such as documentary films and advertisements do not exist in a discursive vacuum. They do not construct or represent stable meaning; rather, their effectiveness is contingent on dynamic and shifting relationships with other discourses and how audiences “take up” those interwoven discourses to “formulate and

articulate a version of the world” (Luke, 1995, p. 14). The creators of advertisements like the University of Phoenix’s “Rocket,” which I analyze in this chapter, construct texts that contribute to a particular articulation of reality that has been assembled through disparate discourses over time and will, the creators assume, be accepted by the audience as felicitous representations of reality. Indeed, the voiceover in “Rocket” begins with a verb—“imagine”—that acts as a command which implores the viewer to conceptualize a different version of his or her reality and to conceive of his or her own experience with higher education (or potential avenues of pursuing higher education) in a specific way. The advertisement, through its voiceover and images, creates a discursive frame through which the audience can understand its message by virtue of their exposure to (and, perhaps, acceptance of) intertextually related discourses of K-12 and higher education, thus fostering and “confirm[ing] attitudes and ideologies in the audience” (van Dijk, 1993, p. 263).

Fairclough (1993) is careful to point out that analysts should resist the temptation to make assumptions about the “interpretive practices of audiences” (p. 31). That is, critical discourse analysts should not assume that audiences—such as the audience for “Rocket”—are universally and equally susceptible to the influence of discourses produced by powerful groups, or that texts will have the same persuasive effect on all audiences. However, van Dijk (1993) observes that “out of their own best interests and corresponding ideologies and attitudes, many members of the audience will tend to adopt” (p. 268) the discursive models presented by such texts. My analyses of certain FPCU advertisements will, inevitably, assume that these texts have a specific effect on audiences that might not be true for every viewer.

I also assume, however, that the advertisements are tailored to appeal to a demographic with similar exposure to related discourses. Therefore, my consideration of audience reception

will be limited to the assumed *intentionality* of such effects on the part of the text's creator, though I do not assume the creators intentionally refer to other specific discourses in order to produce those effects. To elaborate, I operate from the theoretical perspective that emphasizes the intertextuality of discourses that—no matter how seemingly discrete—function as part of a larger and more complex discursive network. In that sense, “audiences interpret texts against their background knowledge and the information they already have about the subject in question” (van Dijk, 1993, p. 242), including what they have learned from previous discourses. Further, I do not assume that most of the “target” viewers of these advertisements are trained to subject such texts to a prescribed degree of critical scrutiny, though that might be the case. Fairclough (1995) reminds us that the effects that texts have on readers do not necessarily determine their significance as discursive artifacts: “Although readings may vary, any reading is a product of an interface between the properties of the text and the interpretative resources and practices which the interpreter brings to bear upon the text” (p. 12-13). As such, I will only address the creators' persuasive techniques and the network of preceding and adjacent discourses upon which those maneuvers are intentionally or unintentionally based.

Themes and Genres of FPCU Advertisements

A review of twenty-three television advertisements for four of the largest FPCUs in terms of student enrollment—the University of Phoenix, DeVry University, Kaplan University, and Everest College—revealed two overarching (and often overlapping) thematic categories: 1) advertisements that directly or indirectly criticize the “status quo” of higher education and present the FPCU as a more efficient and/or innovative alternative; and 2) advertisements that address particular demographics of students—predominantly racial minorities, full-time workers,

economically disadvantaged people, and single parents—using texts and images and suggest that traditional colleges and universities cannot serve their needs. Based on their shared formal features, semantic content, and rhetorical functions, the FPCU advertisements reviewed represent three distinct genres: the testimonial, the journey, and the symbolic. These genres, which I will describe later in this section, are useful analytical schema because they reveal FPCUs' assumptions about prospective students' shared cultural knowledge of higher education and interpretive frames for persuasive discourse. A consideration of genre—which examines the exigence for the creation of particular modes of persuasive discourse, the possible reasons an FPCU might choose to create an advertisement in one genre over another, and the concomitant assumptions FPCUs make about prospective students' values and desires—is a more productive exercise than speculating about how effectively FPCU advertisements attract new customers. In other words, the advertisements reveal far more about the creators of the text than they do about the intended audience, and an analysis of genre is a useful vehicle for understanding the underlying logic of FPCUs' intentions when creating promotional discourse.

Berkenkotter and Huckin (1993) describe genres as “dynamic rhetorical forms that develop from responses to recurrent situations and serve to stabilize experience and give it coherence and meaning” (p. 479). However, Miller (1984) would take issue with this definition because it hinges on the notion of “recurrent situations” and objective generalizations about seemingly automatic discursive responses to those situations. Miller argues that in rhetorical analyses, consideration of genre is only useful insofar as it is understood to be reflexive, culturally and situationally contingent, and based on the practical social function performed by discourses in each genre. She opposes the use of genre in rhetorical studies as a sorting device for creating finite taxonomies or categorizing discourses based on formal features or their use in

“recurring” situations. In Miller’s view, the very notion of recurrence as a materialist account of reality is flawed, since recurrence is an “intersubjective phenomenon” and “a social occurrence” rooted in human interpretation(s) of events (p. 156). Human knowledge relies upon the creation of types and our ability to define and determine situations. Miller argues that “at the center of action is a process of interpretation,” since humans act based on an understanding of meaning (p. 156). Through socially-situated interpretations of events, however, people can agree upon the recognition of “relevant similarities” between and across discourses, thus establishing agreed-upon types. In a similar vein, Bawarshi and Reif (2010) highlight the relationship between individuals’ background knowledge and recognition of genre: “Genre knowledge is linked to background knowledge—both content knowledge and knowledge of shared assumptions, including knowledge of kairos, having to do with rhetorical timing and opportunity” (p. 80).

According to Miller (1984), when a situation arises for which a type does not exist, people form new ones, which eventually enter the inventory of existing types (p. 156). The process of typification and classification, Miller argues, is a linguistic phenomenon, since “types are created and shared through communication and come to reside in language” (p. 157). Drawing from the work of Campbell and Jamieson (1982), Miller describes the hierarchical relationship between form and substance, in which “form shapes the response of the reader or listener to substance by providing instruction... about how to perceive and interpret; this guidance disposes the audience to anticipate, to be gratified, to respond in a certain way” (p. 159). Through this relationship between form and substance, the symbolic structures of discourse “take on pragmatic force and become interpretable actions” (p. 160). In this view, genre is most useful as a means of analyzing “cultural rationality” and “cultural patterns” (p. 165).

Following Miller's criteria, consideration of the genres of FPCU ads is a useful mechanism for understanding the "reasoning and purposes characteristic of the culture" (p. 165) in which higher education discourse, FPCUs themselves, and prospective students reside. I do not suggest that the genres I have identified belong to a closed and finite list. Though I do, in part, classify the advertisements based on their formal features, the classification of genre is based on the relationship between those features, the content of the advertisements, and the resulting social action they seek to perform.

The FPCU advertisements analyzed in this chapter represent three genres: the journey, in which one or more characters' stories are presented visually as linear narratives accompanied by a voiceover or on-screen text that present the values and goals of the FPCU; the symbolic, in which non-sequential images which are meant to serve as references to ideas about higher education are accompanied by a voiceover that presents the values and goals of the FPCU; and the testimonial, in which a real FPCU graduate discusses his or her personal background, college experience, and post-graduation career in a seemingly extemporaneous narrative. Though many discourses—including advertisements for other products and services—share some of the qualities of the discourses in these genres, FPCU advertisements embody a set of "interpretive rules" that are unique to the colleges they promote, the rhetorical action the institution seeks to perform, and the "cultural rationality" of higher education framing the discursive environment (Miller, 1984, p. 164-165). As I analyze the rhetorical techniques in FPCU advertisements in this chapter, I will identify the genre to which they belong and discuss the significance of each genre in my interpretation of the social action of the advertisements.

Through the lenses of CDA, rhetorical analysis, and speech act theory—and including a consideration of genre—this section presents analyses of a selection of five television

advertisements for FPCUs: “Rocket,” a 2014 advertisement for the University of Phoenix; “Desks,” a 2009 advertisement for Kaplan University; “Thinking Ahead,” a 2007 advertisement for the University of Phoenix; and “Josh and His Father” and “Seattle, WA,” 2011 advertisements for ITT Technical Institutes.

The University of Phoenix: “Rocket” (2014)

In January 2014, the advertising agency Arnold Worldwide produced “Rocket,” a sixty-second advertisement for the University of Phoenix that aired on major television networks and appeared as sponsored content on YouTube. Sentimental, upbeat piano music plays throughout the advertisement.⁸

Table 1

Transcription of “Rocket” (2014), an Advertisement for the University of Phoenix

Time	Verbal text of voiceover	Image on the screen
(0:01)	<i>Male voice 1; audio sounds like an astronaut radio transmission from space:</i> And we’re getting a picture on the monitor.	A slow-motion underwater shot of a baby swimming
(0:04)	<i>Male voice 2:</i> You’re coming in nice and clear. <i>Male voice 1:</i> Roger that.	A young white ⁹ girl in a classroom playing with model planets while a young African American woman watches
(0:16)	<i>Male voice 1:</i> Satellite... [unintelligible] everything is clear.	The girl opens a blue lunchbox and removes a

⁸ The structure of my transcription is modeled after the method used by Kress (1985). The times that appear in the left-hand column refer to the point, in seconds, when the utterance in the voiceover begins. The text of the voiceover appears in the middle column. In the right-hand column, I describe the images that appear on the screen when the utterances in the middle column are spoken.

⁹ I reference the race of actors throughout my analysis because the representation of racial minorities is a critical rhetorical component of many FPCU advertisements.

(0:18)	<i>Male voice 1:</i> [Unintelligible]	<p>tube, resembling a tube of toothpaste, labeled with the word “PIZZA” and a barcode; the puts the tube in her mouth and squeezes it</p> <p>Close-up of the girl’s face as she looks forward determinedly; the camera pans out to reveal that she is wearing a purple leotard and jumping on a trampoline; a brief flash of the profile of a middle-aged white woman in an astronaut helmet</p>
(0:24)	[Unintelligible audio of radio transmissions]	A slow-motion sequence of the girl performing a gymnastic leap
(0:28)	[Unintelligible audio of radio transmissions continues]	A white, teenage girl walks down the hallway of a school; the camera zooms in on her feet; she is wearing what appears to be a pair of astronaut boots
(0:35)	<i>Female voice:</i> Imagine if everything you learned led to the one job you always wanted.	A white woman in a lab coat looking through the lens of a microscope
(0:41)	That would be nothing like today’s educational system and exactly like the University of Phoenix.	The woman sitting in a movie theater, smiling as she watches a film about space
(0:46)	Because we believe that every education—not just ours—should be built around the career that you want.	The woman, wearing an astronaut helmet, gazing at the stars through the window of a spacecraft

(0:57)	Imagine that.	A frontal shot of the woman wearing an astronaut helmet; the University of Phoenix logo and URL appear on the screen, accompanied by text: “Let’s get to work.”
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A Critical Discourse Analysis of “Rocket”

Following the tenets of CDA, an analysis of “Rocket” would begin with the assumption that “discursive activity structures the social space within which actors act, through the constitution of concepts, objects, and subject positions” (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 25). Through that lens, the voiceover—the verbal utterances that accompany the images in the advertisement—can be understood as discursive activity that constructs an asymmetrical power relationship between the creator of the text and the intended audience of that text. The University of Phoenix acts as the more powerful participant in this exchange of information, since it is responsible for the content of the advertisement and the manner in which it is delivered. Further, in a material sense, the University of Phoenix, as a for-profit corporation, stands to benefit from recruiting potential students.

Beyond this power imbalance, the effectiveness of the voiceover and the images in the advertisement is heavily dependent upon the audience’s exposure to previous and adjacent discourses about higher education; this intertextuality allows the advertisement to sustain and reproduce its representation of reality. For example, the voiceover directly discredits “today’s educational system” as one that is indifferent about its students’ career outcomes (“Imagine if everything you learned led to the one job you always wanted. That would be nothing like today’s educational system”). In this manner, the University of Phoenix offers an unsubstantiated (but

presumably familiar) truism: An education from a non-FPCU college or university will not give students the knowledge they need to get “the one job” they have always wanted. That truism invokes the trope of decline presented in *A Nation at Risk* (and prominently featured in *Waiting for “Superman”*) which suggests that the American public education system is failing to adequately prepare students for the workforce. While the creators of “Rocket” might not intentionally draw upon *A Nation at Risk* and *Waiting for “Superman”* specifically, the advertisement contains linguistic features—words and phrases—that indicate a shared ideology with those texts. Together, these widely circulated texts represent discourses that are “available to text producers and interpreters” (Fairclough, 1992, p. 194).

Also, because of the prevalent discourses of higher education that suggest that a traditional college education is no longer a reliable path to a job, the advertisers can present this claim and assume the audience will accept it based on its inherent truth value or its apparent adherence to common sense. In doing so, the University of Phoenix positions itself as the higher education experience of the future, since it offers an outcome that is diametrically opposed to what it establishes as the status quo. The voiceover discursively constructs the current reality of higher education, alludes to preceding and adjacent discourses that corroborate that representation of reality, presents an ideal alternative to that representation, and asserts that the University of Phoenix currently offers that ideal.

Further, the voiceover presents an endorsement of the University of Phoenix’s conception of higher education while also condemning the current configuration of higher education. While the voiceover states that a situation in which one’s education leads to a successful career is “exactly like the University of Phoenix,” the verbs driving the sentences around that statement—“imagine” and “believe”—suggest that the University of Phoenix is fundamentally restructuring

the reality of higher education by offering an abstract, alternate vision of the institution. The voiceover states that “every education” should lead to one’s dream career, thus extending its values beyond the University of Phoenix and other FPCUs and into the entire “system” of higher education as an institution. By expressing the idea that the University is concerned with that broader landscape—“not just ours”—the voiceover situates the University of Phoenix as a trailblazer that is disinterested in its own success in the higher education revolution, but is ultimately invested in transforming a flawed system. Because the images in the advertisement are such a radical departure from conceptions of education that exist in the public imagination, the audience is invited to contrast them with what the voiceover calls “today’s educational system,” a phrase that is fraught with the rhetorical baggage of inefficiency, bureaucratic incompetence, and stagnation.

Moreover, by stating that all institutions should be “built around the career[s]” their students want, the advertisement suggests that colleges and universities must restructure themselves to accommodate their students’ career objectives. Through discourse, the voiceover establishes a power differential between speaker and audience by assuming the authority to define the current deficiencies of the higher education system and construct the University of Phoenix as representative of an (as yet unattained) ideal. The advertisement is designed to make the viewer who identifies with the people it depicts feel the prospect of empowerment at the point in their lives when they feel disempowered because of their limited formal schooling.

A Narrative Rhetorical Analysis of “Rocket”

Before applying the concepts of narrative rhetorical analysis to “Rocket,” I will begin with a summary of the narrative the advertisement presents: Put simply, the *images* in “Rocket”

function as a story-board tracing the story of a woman who becomes an astronaut. The voiceover and the images are not overtly related, but the images make a significant contribution to the argument the advertisement makes: The woman in the advertisement seems to have a markedly non-traditional (and whimsical) educational experience. Opening with an image of a baby swimming, the advertisement presents the story of the woman's career journey beginning practically at her birth. Throughout the advertisement, her character is accompanied and monitored by others who seem invested in her progress, from the woman in the classroom watching as the girl plays with model planets to the woman supervising her gymnastics routine. Viewers do not see a comprehensive picture of her educational experience, as the advertisement shows her classroom experiences only in fragments; we cannot determine whether she attends a private or public school as a young student, and we do not know if her character attends the University of Phoenix. However, throughout the advertisement, the female character which is the focal point of the ad, and thus the narrative's protagonist, has the freedom to explore and pursue her interests. She plays with model planets in a nicely appointed classroom; at lunch, she eats what appears to be "space food" intended for astronauts in outer space; she wears astronaut boots to school; she uses a sophisticated telescope in a high-tech laboratory. Indeed, the path to her career begins very early in her life, and if we are to read the images alongside the voiceover, the activities she participates in are all directly related to "the job [she has] always wanted."

While narratology—the study of narrative structure and its effect on individuals' perception of the world—is a theoretical perspective traditionally applied to literature, scholars have applied its analytical principles to other fields, such as anthropology and sociolinguistics (Kearns, 1999). Barry (1990) argues that narratology has become "an autonomous field distinct from literary theory," since "strong claims" have been made that narrative acts as "a particular,

essential, and basic cognitive instrument” (p. 297). In *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), Booth argues that narratives are intended to persuade readers and, as such, contain persuasive elements; however, Kearns (1999) and others have noted that his approach maintains a markedly formalist focus on examining “textual features rather than considering, theoretically, how they are or might be perceived by readers” (Kearns, 1999, p. 9). Broadening Booth’s approach to the study of the persuasive effects of narrative, Phelan (2007) claims that “the rhetorical approach conceives of narrative as a purposeful communicative act” in which narratives do not simply summarize events, but create new events in which “someone is doing something with a representation of events” (p. 287). “Rocket,” which represents the “journey” genre of FPCU advertisements, presents a narrative, which the rhetorical theorist defines as “somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened” (p. 287). In this understanding, there are ethical dimensions to both the narrative itself and the telling of the narrative. Phelan argues that the narrative approach to rhetorical analysis considers the “relations among tellers, audiences, and the something that has happened,” as well as the purpose of the telling of the narrative (p. 287). When conducting a narrative rhetorical analysis, the analyst “[recognizes] that narrative communication is a multi-layered event, one in which tellers seek to engage and influence their audiences’ cognition, emotions, and values” (p. 287). Phelan’s views are especially relevant to an interpretation of advertisements, since much of his work concerns the effect of narrative persuasion in works of fiction. Advertisements like “Rocket” do not present the tellings of events that actually took place; rather, characters and actors, paired with images, craft a narrative intended to sublimate the feelings of failure and inadequacy that current and potential FPCU students often feel.

Since FPCU advertisements rely on the supposition that prospective students will personally identify with the characters and experiences in the narratives they present—not just with the representation of reality presented in the advertisements—the audience(s) of FPCU advertisements merit further attention. Phelan (2007) suggests that, in terms of “readerly interests and responses” to narrative, as individuals enter the positions of audience members, they sometimes develop a “mimetic” response to the content of the narrative (p. 297). This response “involve[s] an audience’s interest in the characters as possible people and in the narrative world as like our own, that is, either our actual world or one that is possible given what we know and assume about the actual world” (p. 297). That response provokes the audience member’s “emotions, desires, hopes, expectations, satisfactions, and disappointments” as they are reflected in the experiences of characters in the narrative (p. 297). The mimetic component of the audience’s response is crucial to the ability of an FPCU advertisement to convince a potential student to take the course of action alluded to in the advertisement: rejecting traditional education by recognizing its failure to help that student reach his or her potential, and enrolling in courses at the FPCU in question. In order to generate that response, the narrative in the advertisement must present characters, stories, and images that have some degree of experiential or emotional resonance with the audience.

However, merely presenting a familiar or relatable narrative is not sufficient to fulfill the persuasive purpose of FPCU advertisements; they must also generate a sense of hope and opportunity for the ideal audience. Kirkwood (1992) focuses on the particular power of stories to communicate “narratives of possibility,” arguing that “even stories that employ fanciful possibilities may merely reinforce familiar values and beliefs, rather than suggesting new ways of living” (p. 32). So the ideal audience member might not respond to “Rocket” by deciding to

pursue the protagonist's dream of becoming an astronaut, but the narrative demonstrates "specific possibilities of thought and action [that] are both conceivable and attainable" in the general sense, thus "disclosing possible states of mind" (p. 38). In the case of FPCU advertisements, this process is achieved as Kirkwood (1992) describes it:

Rhetors may use stories or other symbolic discourse to provoke a certain reaction from the audience; this audience response, rather than the state of mind of characters in the story, is the possibility to be disclosed. (p. 38)

The University of Phoenix—present in the advertisement as the narrator who delivers the voiceover—would hope that the viewer would assume an observer position in which there is a clear and obvious relationship between the images of the protagonist's narrative and the spoken voiceover, thus making the connection between the woman's access to a University of Phoenix connection and her ability to pursue her dreams. The ideal audience for the advertisement, or the "hypothetical perfect audience" (Phelan, 2007, p. 296) that understands every nuance of the narrative, would act upon that connection by visiting the URL provided at the end of the advertisement and enrolling in courses at the University of Phoenix.

Since the University of Phoenix and other FPCUs understand that they are not always addressing their ideal audience, they often tailor their promotional discourse to obfuscate its primary purpose of "selling" the college. To do so, many FPCU advertisements are designed to seem as if they are critiquing the current standards of higher education and postulating a more student-centered, career-oriented alternative. Speech act theory is a useful mechanism for identifying and analyzing this technique, since it examines the intended or actual effect of statements separated from the linguistic elements of those statements.

A Speech Act Theory Analysis of “Rocket”

Developed by John Austin and John Searle, speech act theory holds that in specific contexts, utterances can, in and of themselves, perform particular actions. Austin (1962) called such utterances *performatives*, since they can perform certain functions merely by being spoken (such as, in the case of a wedding, an officiant stating, “I now pronounce you man and wife”). Austin’s theory held that performatives “seem like statements” but “lack what is thought to be a necessary property of statements—a truth value” (Schiffrin, 1994, p. 50). In other words, performatives do not merely convey or describe information, as statements are generally expected to do; instead, the utterances themselves are “part of the doing of an action” (Schiffrin, 1994, p. 50). Central to the function of performatives is the context in which they are delivered; for example, an utterance like “I now pronounce you man and wife” would not meet the contextual conditions necessary for the performative to serve its perlocutionary effect if it were directed at a crowd of spectators at a baseball game. According to Fish (2014), at its core, speech act theory is “an account of the conditions of intelligibility, of what it means to mean in a community, of the procedures which must be instituted before one can even be said to be understood” (p. 245). Further emphasizing the importance of those contextual conditions, Kearns (1999) argues that for the speech act theorist, “no utterance can be said to be understood unless it is viewed within a context in which some action or effect is possible” (p. 10). Though a descriptive analysis of an utterance might highlight linguistic features, speech act theory “looks outside of... sentences” and emphasizes that “the force of any utterance is determined by the conventions surrounding that utterance as well as by those the utterance evokes” (Kearns, 1999, p. 11).

Because advertisements so transparently try to accomplish the perlocutionary effect of persuasion, organizations like the University of Phoenix use techniques to distance themselves from that speech act (Sedivy, 2003, p. 27). After all, in the case of advertisements, “providers of information are blatantly self-interested and the recipients fundamentally skeptical” (Calfee, 1997), ostensibly making the effective persuasion of the audience more difficult. Sedivy (2003) argues that two ways for advertisers to obfuscate the persuasive function of their discourse are to “use indirect linguistic forms rather than forms that transparently reflect the speech act” and to “use general visual/linguistic cues to appear to be serving a purpose other than persuasion or advertising” (p. 27). In “Rocket,” the voiceover demonstrates both of those techniques. While the audience is being directly implored to do something—“imagine”—the ultimate persuasive goal of the advertisement is not directly stated. The audience is not told, for example, “Call one of our admissions counselors today to enroll in classes at the University of Phoenix.” Instead, the primary objective of the voiceover *seems* to be to condemn the current state of higher education, meaning the advertisement appears to be serving the purpose of exposing the audience to alternatives to traditional colleges and universities. Speech act theory helps us understand how this advertisement can be perceived by audiences as a condemnation of traditional higher education. Even when the University of Phoenix is suggested as an alternative—“That would be nothing like today’s educational system and exactly like the University of Phoenix”—an indirect linguistic form is used, and the real persuasive goal of the advertisement is couched in language of concern about individual students and the inability of traditional colleges to meet their needs (“Because we believe that every education—not just ours—should be built around the career that you want. Because we believe that every education—not just ours—should be built around the career that you want”). Further, the visual cues in the advertisement are components of a story

that has an indirect relationship with the voiceover, thus refiguring the way audiences interpret its message.

Using a different narrative technique, “Desks” (2009), an advertisement for Kaplan University, also presents traditional education as a flawed system in need of more innovative and flexible alternatives.

Kaplan University: “Desks” (2009)

“Desks,” which instantiates the symbolic genre of FPCU advertisements, was created by Ogilvy & Mather Marketing and released as one of a pair of advertisements called the “Talent Campaign.”

Table 2

Transcription of “Desks” (2009), an advertisement for Kaplan University

Time	Verbal text of voiceover	Image on the screen
(0:05)	<i>Male voice:</i> Where is it written	An antique wooden school desk on a beach The same desk on an ascending elevator The desk beside a tree in the sunshine, surrounded by fallen leaves
(0:07)	that the old way is the right way?	A young man rides a bicycle past a home and throws a newspaper into its front yard

(0:12)	Where is it written	The desk partially submerged in a lake
(0:13)	that a traditional education is the only way to get an education?	<p>A row of identical antique wooden school desks arranged in a parking lot</p> <p>Two parallel rows of desks in the frozen foods aisle of a grocery store</p> <p>A single desk obstructing the automatic sliding glass doors of a grocery store</p>
(0:20)	Where is it written	A close-up image of the doors hitting the sides of the desk that is obstructing them
(0:21)	that classes	A group of children playing basketball outdoors in the foreground; a row of desks lines the chain-link fence behind them
(0:22)	only take place in a classroom?	A desk in the middle of a residential street

		<p>Laundry drying on a line in the backyard of a small home; the breeze moves a pink bed sheet to reveal a desk behind it</p> <p>A man sitting on an old, rusted chair near the fuel pumps at a run-down gas station with his feet propped on a desk waves to a passing car; a line of identical desks rings the perimeter of the gas station</p>
(0:25)	What if you could get your degree to develop	A subway train approaches a platform; the platform is filled with desks
(0:28)	your talent,	An interior shot of a subway car, which is filled with desks; an elderly man reads a newspaper and a man in a suit gazes out the window
(0:29)	no matter who you are	People bowling in a bowling alley; several desks sit in the middle of the lanes

(0:31)	or where you are?	The camera is positioned behind bowling pins; a ball strikes several pins, revealing that a man has thrown a bowling ball between the legs of a desk that sits in the middle of the lane
(0:33)	What if there was a	A view, through a window, of a rooftop in an urban area covered with desks
(0:34)	different kind of university—	A desk sits on the rusted ledge of a building high above a city
(0:37)	one that's changing the rules?	A dusty barn, sunlight streaming through the cracks of the walls; the barn is filled with desks; birds flutter on and around the desks
(0:39)	That comes to you?	A young person whose gender is unclear does a trick on a skateboard on a city sidewalk, which is lined with a row of desks

(0:42)	That fits in your life—	A desert canyon filled with rows of desks
(0:45)	even adapts to how you learn?	Desks sitting atop large rock formations
(0:49)	Where is it written that you can't change your life? That's just the thing;	A residential street filled with rows of desks; the camera approaches them from the street level and then pans above them to reveal hundreds of desks filling the street
(0:56)	it isn't written anywhere.	<p>A row of desks snaking down a trail in the desert; the camera pans down to a large canyon with a seemingly endless row of desks lining the trail below</p> <p>A lone desk sits at the edge of a city intersection at dusk</p> <p>The Kaplan University logo appears over a blue screen, accompanied by Kaplan's phone number, URL, and the</p>

		phrase “A different school of thought.”
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When the “Talent Campaign” was released in 2009, Kaplan University published a press release on its website explaining the message the institution hoped to communicate through the advertisements. Referring to “Desks,” the release states:

A second commercial features hundreds of iconic school desks in unexpected locations, providing a visual metaphor for the evolution now taking place in education that no longer requires students to sit in a physical classroom, but allows them to learn virtually anywhere at any time. The Kaplan University print and online ads feature a variety of individuals, including stay-at-home moms, professionals[,] and lifelong learners, presenting a more inclusive portrait of today’s college student. The ads illustrate the ever-growing necessity for more flexible, student-centered learning environments. (Kaplan University, 2009)

That explanation of the advertisement—that the desks appear in a variety of settings outside of classrooms to represent the flexibility of online courses—represents how Kaplan wants the public to interpret the meaning of the advertisements. However, that explanation elides many of the advertisement’s key rhetorical moves that a deeper analysis reveals.

A Critical Discourse and Speech Act Theory Analysis of “Desks”

As discussed in Chapter 2, a common rhetorical technique in K-12 and higher education reform discourse is to position privatization as a radical interruption of the out-of-touch status quo. This technique features prominently in “Desks,” which begins with three questions that share a stem: “Where is it written that ____?” By suggesting that the “rules” regulating how students should pursue higher education or how colleges and universities should function are not officially prescribed, established, or etched in stone—they did not, after all, appear on the tablets that Moses received on Mount Sinai—the voiceover presents Kaplan University as a subversive

challenge to a “traditional education,” which it explicitly references at 0:13. This technique is similar to the suggestion in *Waiting for “Superman”* that charter schools are a progressive solution to a failed system. In a similar vein, Kaplan alludes to itself as a university that is “changing the rules” (0:37), though the beginning of the voiceover suggests that there are no rules “written anywhere.” From the perspective of CDA, Kaplan University has more social and economic capital in this exchange of information, and it stands to gain financially by convincing students to enroll. Thus, the critical discourse analyst should be skeptical of Kaplan’s posturing as a bastion of renegade academics.

Interestingly, the advertisement does not directly mention or endorse Kaplan University by name until the last frame, when the school’s logo and contact information appear on-screen. The “symbolic” genre to which the advertisement belongs allows Kaplan to present itself as an institution that is primarily invested in helping to replace a broken and obsolete educational system and to rescue students from traditional colleges and universities, not one that is marketing itself to potential customers. Thus, through the use of rhetorical questions to establish claims, the absence of a distinguishable individual asking those questions (which actively blurs the distinction between speaker and audience), the use of the passive voice to depersonalize the issue, and the use of an idiom (“where is it written”) that implies confrontation or challenge, Kaplan appears to be a neutral participant in the power exchange of the advertisement. Kaplan also avoids appearing as if it is attempting to persuade the audience to accept a particular message; the audience is left with the overall impression that the “old way” of pursuing higher education is flawed and that there are better options available to students.

A Rhetorical Analysis of “Desks”

The persuasive techniques used in “Desks” reflect the demands of the rhetorical situation in which the advertisement was created. At the time this advertisement was released, Kaplan boasted record student enrollment and revenue; thus, while its purpose was to increase enrollment and revenue, the advertisement was not a response to a decline in either category¹⁰. Kaplan (and other FPCUs) did, however, face a barrage of criticism in the news media and a growing lack of public support when the advertisement was released. A 2010 article in *The New York Times* described Kaplan as a company under intense scrutiny “amid growing concerns that the [for-profit college] industry leaves too many students mired in debt, and with credentials that provide little help in finding jobs”:

Four whistle-blower suits against Kaplan under the federal False Claims Act have been made public in the last few years, all making accusations that the company used deceptive practices in its quest for profits, including enrolling unqualified students and paying recruiters for each student enrolled, a practice forbidden by federal law. (Lewin, 2010)

That scrutiny contributed to what Bitzer (1968) would call the exigence—the pressing need prompting the rhetor’s message—for the advertisement and the constraints within which Kaplan would fashion it. Because of the increasing scrutiny Kaplan faced at the time “Desks” was released, Kaplan is not the focus of the advertisement; its name is never spoken during the voiceover, and the only explicit reference to the college is the appearance of its logo at the end of the advertisement. “Desks” eschews a direct focus on Kaplan and focuses instead on the flaws of traditional higher education, which reflects this project’s overarching concern with the role of such texts in creating a public discourse that undermines the ethos of public education. Amidst a

¹⁰ In Fall 2009, Kaplan University enrolled 103,849 students (compared to 81,600 in Fall 2007) and earned \$1.57 billion in revenue (Washington Post Company, Def 14A SEC Filing, 2012).

stagnant economic climate only a year removed from a global financial crisis and record levels of unemployment, Kaplan used the rampant public criticism of *all* colleges and universities as an opportunity to deflect attention from attacks on its credibility, thus allowing it to pursue its persuasive purpose of “selling” Kaplan to prospective students. The advertisers use three rhetorical devices—metonymy, antithesis, and dissociation—in an effort to achieve this goal.

The Use of Metonymy in “Desks”

One aspect of “Desks” that distinguishes it from most of the other FPCU advertisements analyzed in this study is its absence of characters. There are very few people in “Desks” and we only see them from a distance; we never clearly see people’s faces, and the ages, genders, and ethnicities of the people in the advertisement are mostly unclear. Instead, the agent of the advertisement and its central visual trope is the antique school desk, which functions as a visual metonymic device standing in for traditional education and invoking both its obsolescence and the viewer’s own experiences with it.

Fahnestock (2011) defines *metonymy* as a rhetorical figure in which “substitutions with terms [are] chosen according to some recoverable, specific principle of association” (p. 102). The use of metonymy “makes a comment about the idea for which it has been substituted, and thereby helps to define that idea” (Harris, 2010, p. 5). Metonyms may be either verbal or visual; Hayward (1996) observes that “metonymy can be applied to an object that is visibly present but which represents another object or subject to which it is related but which is absent” (p. 217). The school desk in “Desks,” which serves the metonymic function of standing in for traditional schooling, is an antique; as an outdated object associated with K-12 education, the desk invokes the failing, out-of-touch public school system. In most of the images we see in the advertisement,

especially in the earlier scenes, desks are either physically obstructing pathways, consuming usable public space, or forming a barrier around spaces, thus trapping and limiting the people surrounded by them. Using the image of the desks, the advertisement argues that traditional education “gets in the way of life.”

To examine the network of metonymic relationships in the advertisements more deeply, the idea of an obsolete K-12 education system, for which the desk is a visual metonym, is another metonym meant to stand in for an equally obsolete system of higher education. Since the intended audience for the advertisement is, by Kaplan’s own admission, nontraditional students who may or may not have ever stepped into a college classroom, the desk culls an understanding of education that people watching the advertisement will recognize. The goal of the advertisement is for the audience to transfer that understanding of K-12 public education—the same bleak picture of public education presented in *Waiting for “Superman”*—to traditional institutions of higher education. The audience is then expected to consider whether or not traditional education has been useful in their lives, and then question whether or not traditional higher education will be useful in their lives.

The Use of Antithesis and Dissociation in “Desks”

Through the metonymic function of the desk and the rhetorical questions constituting much of the voiceover, the advertisers establish traditional higher education as an *antithesis* to FPCUs. As a figure of speech, antithesis is created “when two parallel phrases or clauses feature words than an audience recognizes as opposites,” such as the phrase “buy low, sell high” (Fahnestock, 2011, p. 232). In a broader sense, antithesis acts as a figure of balance in which two contrasting ideas are placed in opposition to each other, usually through some use of parallel

structure. In “Desks,” the image of the desk casts the traditional system of higher education as outmoded and substandard; the voiceover positions that system as an antithesis by describing a “different kind of university—one that’s changing the rules” (0:34-0:37), “fits into students’ lives]” (0:42), and “adapts to how [students] learn” (0:45).

In addition to consigning traditional universities as the antithesis to FPCUs, “Desks” *dissociates* the traditional college experience from the higher education experience of the future. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) identify two overarching categories of argument schemes: association and dissociation. In schemes that use association, the speaker establishes a relationship between two independent ideas so that the audience will transfer their understanding of one to the other. Conversely, dissociation occurs when the speaker summons an idea that the audience believes to be unified and splits it into two separate ideas. Van Rees (2007) argues that “the distinction that the dissociation makes is presented as common knowledge and the two resulting notions are authoritatively declared different” (p. 2). Perelman (1969) contends that any idea can be subjected to dissociation:

To real justice we can oppose apparent justice and with real democracy contrast apparent democracy, or formal or nominal democracy, or quasi democracy, or even “democracy” (in quotes). What is thus referred to as apparent is usually what the audience would normally call justice, democracy, etc. It only becomes apparent after the criterion of real justice or real democracy has been applied to it and reveals the error concealed under the name. The dissociation results in a depreciation of what had until then been an accepted value and... its replacement by another conception to which is accorded the original value. To effect such a depreciation, one will need a conception that can be shown to be valuable, relevant, as well as incompatible with the common use of the same notion. (Perelman, 1970, p. 1400)

In “Desks,” “traditional education”—which, following Perelman’s example of democracy, could be described as the *apparent* ideal of higher education—is dissociated from the “different kind of university” that offers a more flexible, useful, and personalized student experience. The rhetorical questions throughout the advertisement describe what a “different kind of university”

is *not* by indirectly defining what a traditional university *is*: a place where “classes only take place in a classroom”; a place where “who you are or where you are” determines your access to education; a place that does not “adapt to how [students] learn.”

An earlier advertisement for the University of Phoenix also attempts to dissociate the traditional university from an ideal higher education that better fits into students’ lives. “Thinking Ahead” (2007) rhetorically distances FPCUs from the “status quo” of higher education and features characters who belong to the demographics that FPCUs seek to attract.

The University of Phoenix: “Thinking Ahead” (2007)

“Thinking Ahead,” a sixty-second advertisement for the University of Phoenix that represents the “journey” genre, was released on July 20, 2007. It aired on major television networks and appeared as sponsored content on YouTube. Melodic rock music plays throughout the advertisement.

Table 3

Transcription of “Thinking Ahead” (2007), an Advertisement for the University of Phoenix

Time	On-screen text	Image on the screen
(0:02)	University of	A young white woman lies in bed as sunlight streams through her window
(0:04)	I want a bright shiny new life	The camera pans closer to the woman’s face as she smiles
(0:08)	University of	An African-American man in Army fatigues

		carrying a large backpack stands by an escalator in a large, empty airport terminal
(0:10)	boundaries are nothing	The man, seated at an airport gate with a laptop open next to him and his backpack at his feet, concentrates on writing in a notebook
(0:14)	University of	A Hispanic woman carries a young girl onto a bus
(0:17)	where I am is not where I am going to be	The woman sits on the bus and gazes out the window while the young girl's head rests in her lap
(0:22)	University of	An African-American man in a small, dark apartment open his refrigerator
(0:25)	class is in session when I so choose	The man sits in front of an open laptop and looks intently at the screen while eating
(0:31)	University of	A man jogs in the grass alongside a city street
(0:33)	I am not a hamster, and life is not a wheel	

(0:37)	University of	A young, timid-looking woman steps into a crowded elevator and presses a button
(0:40)	next level, here I come	The woman looks anxious and checks her watch as the doors close
(0:43)	University of	A white man holds up a camera in a classroom, surrounded by other adults with cameras
(0:45)	I don't want to miss a thing	Two young, white boys dressed in tuxedos play the violin at the front of the classroom while a mother in the foreground videotapes them
(0:48-0:57)	<i>Voiceover:</i> One university understands how you live today and where you want to go tomorrow.	A quick sequence of shots while the voiceover plays: The man in Army fatigues smiles; the man who was jogging stretches; the woman who was lying in bed sits on the edge of her bed, smiling; the two boys hold their violins under their arms and bow while the adults around them applaud
(0:58-1:00)	<i>Voiceover/on-screen text:</i> The University of Phoenix. Thinking ahead.	

“Thinking Ahead” represents both of the thematic categories of FPCU advertisements I outlined earlier in this chapter: The advertisement criticizes the status quo of higher education

and argues that the University of Phoenix is the superior alternative, and it features actors who represent particular demographics of students—racial minorities, full-time workers, veterans and current members of the armed forces, and single parents—while using text and images to suggest that traditional colleges and universities cannot serve those students’ needs. However, it is also a notable example of FPCU advertisements because of the direct and ostentatious nature of its claims.

The advertisement was released in 2007, prior to the 2008 economic recession, which perhaps allowed the advertisement to make particularly bold claims about the University of Phoenix and what a degree from the institution can do for a student. While many claims presented in the advertisement’s on-screen text echo familiar sentiments—the University of Phoenix is accessible and convenient, while traditional education, which is likened to a hamster’s wheel, is not attuned to students’ needs—the opening shot of the advertisement is striking. The shot of the woman in bed could easily be included in an advertisement for antidepressant medication; though she smiles weakly at the end of the sequence, she looks unkempt and melancholy, lying in bed in the middle of the day. The accompanying text—“I want a bright shiny new life”—is one of the more egregious and troublesome rhetorical moves made in the advertisements reviewed in this chapter, since it so closely echoes the FPCU training documents that instructed recruiters to exploit prospective students’ emotional pain and dissatisfaction (see Appendix A). Coupled with the direct recruitment discourse presented later in this chapter, that move—and the advertisement’s claim that “one university understands” the needs of students of color, veterans, and the working poor—is illustrative of the emotionally manipulative appeals FPCUs make to vulnerable students.

While they differ significantly from the “journey” genre of FPCU advertisements represented by “Thinking Ahead,” advertisements for ITT Technical Institutes—which fall into the “testimonial” genre—appeal to prospective students by offering a quick and easy path from the “dead end” to higher education and career advancement

ITT Technical Institutes: “Josh and His Father” and “Seattle, WA” (2011)

ITT Technical Institutes, for-profit technical institutes owned and operated by ITT Educational Services, Inc., enroll over 50,000 students at over 130 physical campuses in the United States (ITT, 2015). Tuition at ITT is among the highest in the FPCU industry, with the total cost of tuition as high as \$80,000 for some programs (ITT, 2015). Students who have attended ITT default on their student loans at a higher rate than any other FPCU (Alpert, 2012). For reasons discussed later in this chapter, the advertisements for ITT almost exclusively represent the testimonial category of FPCU advertisements.

In early 2011, ITT released a series of advertisements in which recent ITT graduates discussed their decision to attend ITT and how it helped them to pursue their careers. Two of those advertisements featured two generations of ITT graduates: a father and son (“Josh and His Father”) and a mother and daughter (“Seattle, WA”).¹¹ Since these two advertisements feature FPCU graduates telling their stories, images do not contribute to their meaning in the same manner as the other advertisements analyzed in this chapter; therefore, transcriptions of the

¹¹ According to iSpot.tv, an industry website that tracks television advertising metrics, these two advertisements aired a combined 507 times in December 2015, though they were almost five years old.

spoken and on-screen text of the advertisement appear below without a description of the advertisements' images.

ITT Technical Institutes: “Josh and His Father” (2011)

ON-SCREEN TEXT:

Joshua Mann

Graduated from ITT Tech, Houston, TX (North Campus)

Bachelor of Science Degree
Information Systems Security, 2011

Associate of Science

Information Technology – Computer Network Systems, 2008

JOSH: I drove past ITT Tech every day on the way to work. And I worked in a, uh, warehouse.

I wondered about it—going there—because my father had gone there many years ago.

ON-SCREEN TEXT:

Robert Mann, father

Graduated from ITT Tech, Indianapolis, IN, 1974

ROBERT: Oh, my. I—I really don't feel that Josh is following in my footsteps. I think he's actually taking things to another level. He's doing much better.

JOSH: I've always wanted to work with technology and work on computers. And I knew ITT had those plans. I just needed to figure out a way to, to—get there. That was how I

got in the door first. Setting up financial aid from the beginning—that was how I could attend. I work for a digital forensics investigation company. I would say that I am happy now. I am. My name is Joshua Mann and I am an ITT Tech graduate.

ANNOUNCER: Scholarships and financial aid are available for students who qualify.
Call (800) 942-0077.

ITT Technical Institutes: “Seattle, WA” (2011)

ON-SCREEN TEXT:

Irina Lund

Graduated from ITT Tech, Seattle, WA

Bachelor of Science Degree

Information Systems Security, 2011

Associate of Applied Science Degree

Information Technology – Computer

Network Systems, 2009

IRINA: My name is Irina Lund and I live in Seattle, Washington, and I was born in Moscow, Russia. Before ITT Tech, um, I was bartending and sometimes I had to work, um, two different jobs. You don't get to see your family. I decided to do something about it. I'd been driving by, um, this big building with this ITT Tech sign on it. I work for Play Network and I'm a, uh, network support engineer.

ON-SCREEN TEXT:

Lyudmila Poletaeva

Daughter

Graduated from ITT Tech, Seattle, WA

Associate of Applied Science Degree

Visual Communications, 2010

LYUDMILA: I was really, really proud of her to—the way that she stuck it out. My mom is a role model to me.

IRINA: I definitely would have gone to ITT Tech much earlier than I did. I don't know what I was waiting for. ((laughs))

ANNOUNCER: Scholarships and financial aid are available for those who qualify. Call (888) 443-3660 or visit us on the web. ITT Technical Institute: Education for the future.

The testimonial genre to which ITT's advertisements belong is characterized by real students and graduates describing their experiences with the institution. In most ITT advertisements, including "Josh and His Father" and "Seattle, WA," the academic credentials of the student or graduate are presented as on-screen text. In the spoken text of the advertisement, the student or graduate does not speak directly to the quality of the institution or suggest that ITT is the best institution for any prospective student to attend. Rather, the narratives of the people who appear in the advertisement are presented to make them seem candid, honest, and anecdotal. The advertisements do not directly suggest that the narratives they present are representative of every ITT student's experiences, and they do not claim that prospective students should expect the same results.

The use of parent-child pairs in “Josh and His Father” and “Seattle, WA” both invoke the sense of traditional universities’ “legacy” students and, more importantly, serve as a testament to the longevity of ITT Institutes. As other FPCUs buckle under financial and legal pressure, ITT uses the parent-child narratives to emphasize the legitimacy and long-term staying power of ITT’s brand. Irina’s daughter Lyudmila, like Josh’s father, does not offer any information about her experience at ITT, even though she is identified as an ITT graduate; instead, she expresses pride about her mother’s accomplishments. Neither advertisement presents substantial information about ITT itself or the programs the graduates pursued. Josh narrates that he worked in a warehouse before deciding to attend ITT, which he considered because his father had attended an ITT Institute. He then alludes to his finances being a barrier to enrolling—“I just needed to figure out a way to, to—get there”—before saying that “setting up financial aid from the beginning” facilitated his enrollment. He then offers a tepid assessment of his post-graduation experience: “I work for a digital forensics investigation company. I would say that I am happy now. I am.” In “Seattle, WA,” Irina is a bit more enthusiastic about her experiences at ITT, but her narrative does not include many details about her education at ITT or how her education allowed her to secure a job. She simply says she “decided to do something about” her demanding work schedule; her narrative jumps directly from “I’d been driving by... this big building with this ITT Tech sign on it” to “I work for Play Network and I’m a... network support engineer” without offering an explanation for why she decided to enroll in ITT instead of a different institution or how ITT helped her find her current job.

The primary rhetorical strategy in these testimonial advertisements is the focus on ITT graduates’ seemingly effortless leap from dead-end jobs to successful careers. A discussion of the cost, duration, and structure of the academic programs themselves is absent from the

advertisements. ITT's identity as an FPCU is solely focused on the "result" of higher education, not the path taken to get there. The explicit mention of financial aid at the end of ITT advertisements distinguishes them from those of other FPCUs. While the cost of programs at FPCUs and how prospective students might finance their educations are rarely mentioned in advertisements, they are central to direct student recruitment discourse: the interactions between FPCU recruiters and prospective students. The final section of this chapter presents analyses of such discourse and how they contribute to the overall discursive system of FPCU recruitment.

Direct Student Recruitment Discourse

In August 2010, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) published the results of a year-long investigation of FPCUs' marketing and recruitment strategies. The GAO arranged for undercover applicants to apply for admission and meet with recruiters at 15 FPCUs in six states and the District of Columbia ("Undercover Testing," 2010). These meetings were videotaped, and selected clips were published on the GAO's website. The GAO found that recruiters at all 15 FPCUs "made deceptive or otherwise questionable statements" to the undercover applicants. Several recruiters "encouraged fraudulent practices," such as urging students to falsify information on financial aid forms in order to qualify for more federal student loans. Recruiters at other schools "exaggerated undercover applicants' potential salary after graduation and failed to provide clear information about the college's program duration, costs, or graduation rate despite federal regulations requiring them to do so" ("Undercover Testing," 2010, para. 2).

As the interviews with current and former FPCU students in Chapter 4 will reveal, such deceptive recruiting techniques have been extremely effective in convincing students to enroll in FPCUs. FPCU advertisements establish the brand and brand identity of FPCUs and encourage

students to contact recruiters; thus, they act as the first step in student recruitment, but they are not the most powerful or persuasive element of promotional discourse. By design, direct student recruitment is far more potent. Internal training documents released during the 2012 Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions hearings led by Sen. Tom Harkin and included in the committee’s final report (“For Profit Higher Education: The Failure to Safeguard the Federal Investment and Ensure Student Success”) reveal the extent to which FPCU recruiting strategies are intentionally manipulative and deceptive¹². A document used to train recruiters for ITT Institutes instructs them to ask eight questions that will lead prospective students down the “pain funnel”: “Tell me more about [that problem]...?”; “How long has it been a problem?”; “What have you done to fix it?”; “What has it cost you?”; “Have you given up trying to deal with the problem” (“ITT Pain Funnel,” 2012). At the end of this series of questions, the recruiter is asked to determine whether the prospective student “[has] enough pain to qualify for the next step” (“ITT Pain Funnel,” 2012). One document used to train Kaplan University employees instructs recruiters to “uncover the pain and the fear” of prospective students: “Once they are reminded of how bad things are, this will create a sense of urgency to make this change” (“Kaplan Document,” 2012). Recruiters are instructed to give prospective students a “reality check” by asking, “So why haven’t you taken these steps yet? BE SILENT HERE” (“Kaplan Document,” 2012).

In the direct student recruitment artifacts analyzed for this chapter—internal training documents and interactions between recruiters and undercover applicants in the GAO videos—three primary persuasive techniques were used: (1) the creation of a sense of urgency, (2) the imposition of guilt for not pursuing self-improvement onto students who hesitate to enroll in

¹² The training documents discussed in this chapter are included in Appendix A.

FPCUs, and (3) the dismissal of any concerns about the financial risk or affordability of academic programs at FPCUs. Applicants are accused of not being “serious” about their education or their future if they express any hesitation about the programs. In a videotaped meeting with an undercover applicant at an FPCU in Texas, a recruiter creates a sense of urgency and pressure and makes light of the applicant’s financial concerns:

RECRUITER: ((gesturing to admissions forms)) Sign and date right there for me.

APPLICANT: I’m signing up for school right now?

RECRUITER: Yeah, you’re actually reserving your seat.

APPLICANT: Um—all—I really need to see—figure out the money thing first—I was hoping I could talk to the financial people first.

RECRUITER: No, they won’t even let you back there.

APPLICANT: I’m—am I on the hook for the thirty-eight thousand?

RECRUITER: Let me ask you something—are you real serious about the program?

STUDENT: Yeah, I am—

RECRUITER: Okay.

STUDENT: But I want to see if I can get any grants or anything.

RECRUITER: Well, you’re going to be able to see that once you’re back there, but if you’re serious—

STUDENT: That’s why I was kind of hoping to talk to a financial person to see—

RECRUITER: Yeah.

STUDENT: —how much my payments would be and so on. Can they kind of, like, walk me through it first?

RECRUITER: I know you're nervous.

STUDENT: Yeah. I was hoping your financial people could say, well, here's your total loans. Here's how much your payments are—

RECRUITER: Yeah, they're going to be able to do it when you get back there, but they're not really going to be able to sit down and go over everything with you if you're not willing to reserve your seat.

The recruiter's high-pressure persuasive techniques are obvious throughout the meeting; when the applicant expresses a desire to "talk to the financial people" about financing his education, the recruiter—after first outright denying his request—shifts the conversation to the applicant's level of investment in his future: "Let me ask you something—are you real serious about the program?" When the applicant repeats that he would like to talk to a financial aid counselor, the recruiter implies that the student will not be able to discuss the cost of the program until he has committed to enrolling. In a videotaped meeting at an FPCU in Florida, another recruiter uses the same strategies in a discussion with an undercover applicant and someone posing as the applicant's friend:

APPLICANT: Is there any way I could talk to the—they can run my—the Pell Grant stuff first to tell me how much I can get in loans and stuff and how much comes out of my pocket?

RECRUITER: Actually, out of pocket—I don't think there's anything right now out-of-pocket.

APPLICANT: Okay.

RECRUITER: Um—that will start six months after you graduate.

APPLICANT: No, but I mean—like, um, how much of this total—you know, is—can I get loans for—how much can...

RECRUITER: My question to you right now is, why, right now, is this a concern? Why are you concerned right now about the whole—

APPLICANT'S FRIEND: Well, we didn't quite understand the FAFSA thing, and if he qualifies for any grants, or doesn't—and how much loans are going to be and so on. We were going to, like, compare his payments to his new income and so on, and kind of sit down and chew it over. That's kind of one of the reasons we came.

RECRUITER: You can still talk about it. You can see him [the financial aid representative] right now.

APPLICANT'S FRIEND: Oh, okay.

APPLICANT: Can we go see him?

APPLICANT'S FRIEND: Let's go do that.

RECRUITER: Yeah, after we do this [finish enrolling in the school].

APPLICANT: Oh—

RECRUITER: I thought you wanted to make a change. I'm confused. Let me see what I can do. Give me one second. But here's the thing—I thought you wanted to really do this?

Again, when the applicant asks questions about loans, the recruiter asks why the student is concerned about the cost of the program. When the student explains his concerns and expresses a desire to meet with a financial aid counselor, the recruiter insists that the student finish the enrollment process. The recruiter then questions the student's commitment to his education and

his desire to “make a change.” Later in the same videotaped meeting, the recruiter brings his supervisor, the FPCU’s director of admissions, into the room:

ADMISSIONS DIRECTOR: ((sitting down at the desk)) Okay, so we went from a hundred percent ready to go to—what? I’ll tell you—

APPLICANT: ((laughs)) Well—

ADMISSIONS DIRECTOR: Wow.

APPLICANT: We wanted to talk to somebody—to run my—to see if I can get any Pell Grants or anything like that.

ADMISSIONS DIRECTOR: Right.

APPLICANT: So we were thinking, let’s go crunch the numbers and stuff. And, uh—

ADMISSIONS DIRECTOR: Okay, but here’s the thing. You are not a financial aid expert.

APPLICANT: Yeah, that’s why we want to talk to someone before we sign anything. You know?

ADMISSIONS DIRECTOR: You owe it to yourself—finish your paperwork, apply to the school. This is your admissions and application process. There’s a lot of different things they’re going to expose you to that you’re going to be able to take advantage of— ((leaning forward)) Believe you me, no one here has not gone to school because of financial aid. Don’t you be the first. There’s a lot out there that’s going to make it doable for you. Is it going to be cheap? No. Is it going to be hard? A little bit. But there are certain sacrifices that we as individuals need to make if we really want to get to the end

result. It's up to you. But you know what—if you're this, um, hesitant as to signing your admission paperwork—

APPLICANT: Mm-hmm.

ADMISSIONS DIRECTOR: Then you're not ready to take that step. You haven't made this amount of an investment, ever—

APPLICANT: Ever, yeah.

ADMISSIONS DIRECTOR: —especially in yourself.

APPLICANT: Yeah.

ADMISSIONS DIRECTOR: And honestly, I got to tell you, um, I—I totally understand your concern, but I really—with all due respect—I don't believe you're ready to take this step, period. That paper could say forty thousand dollars. And in your situation, and at your stage in life, you should be ready to make the investment of time and money necessary to get you where you should be at this point.

APPLICANT: Mm-hmm.

ADMISSIONS DIRECTOR: But you're not. And we're trying to help you get there and trying to help you kind of understand it, but there's—What are you really afraid of? There has to be something more.

APPLICANT: We can discuss this more. We can say, hey, you know, this is—you know, the worst-case scenario if you don't get any grants, this—you can get some loans, they will cover some of it, and then, um—uh—((Sounds of paper ripping are heard as the Admissions Director tears up the student's application))

Yet again, the applicant's concerns about financing his education are recast by the recruiter as reluctance to invest in his own future: "But there are certain sacrifices that we as individuals need to make if we really want to get to the end result"; "If you're this... hesitant as to signing your admission paperwork... then you're not ready to take that step." The recruiter takes that opportunity to tell the applicant that he "hasn't made this amount of an investment" in himself, in an attempt to instill a sense of guilt and shame. The recruiter then uses a tactic outlined in the training documents described earlier in this chapter—she asks what the student is "really afraid of" that is stopping him from making an investment in himself.

While there are costs associated with applying to traditional colleges and universities, the "investment" the admissions director is asking the applicant to make by enrolling in an FPCU is a significant one: The application process at FPCU is actually the beginning of the enrollment process, and students immediately accrue tuition costs and fees when they sign application forms. Thus, recruiters persuade prospective students to make a hasty decision by employing discourses that exploit applicants' feelings of shame and failure and appeal to popularly circulated notions of higher education's inevitable payoff. The recruiter's suggestion that "there are certain sacrifices that we as individuals need to make if we really want to get to the end result" echoes the discourses of education as a marketable product that yields a determinable "end result" and frames the costs as "sacrifices that... individuals *need* to make." The recruiter also suggests that the prospective student should have already pursued a college degree, appealing to fears echoed by students in the interviews presented in the next chapter—fears of falling behind or missing out on a critical rite of passage: "You *should be* ready to make the investment of time and money necessary to get you where you *should be* at this point."

Conclusion

The persuasive strategies used to “sell” institutions to prospective students operate within a complex framework of the rhetoric of education policy and higher education discourse. While many of the discursive strains present in FPCU advertisements can be traced to other artifacts and examples of public discourse, the theoretical relationships among those phenomena fail to account for the material consequences of the deceptive marketing techniques used by FPCUs.

Direct student recruitment discourse is more misleading and manipulative than FPCU advertisements because once a prospective student has expressed interest in enrolling in an FPCU, the institution is under less pressure to malign traditional education or establish its brand identity. The student has already contacted the FPCU, which is the ideal outcome of the advertisements. Therefore, the discursive strains present in FPCU advertisements are eschewed in direct student recruitment in favor of more personalized manipulation tailored to each prospective student’s fear and pain. The interviews with current and former FPCU students presented in the following chapter reflect this configuration of phenomena present in promotional discourse. Further, the next chapter reveals the aforementioned consequences of FPCUs marketing strategies as they have been experienced by people who have attended FPCUs.

Chapter Four

“But Not *That* College”: The Voices of FPCU Students

An analysis of the promotional tactics used by FPCUs is fundamentally incomplete without the voices of their intended audience: the students who enroll in those institutions. On the campuses of traditional colleges and universities and the editorial pages of newspapers and magazines, the idea that FPCUs are fraudulent mockeries of higher education is perhaps a foregone conclusion. Regardless of the widespread criticism of FPCUs, their recruitment tactics, and the discursive landscape that enables their promotional techniques to be effective, students routinely decide to enroll in FPCUs.

While the previous chapters emphasize the role of language in documentary films, advertisements, and other strains of public discourse in shaping and re-shaping public opinions about higher education, the aim of those chapters is not to suggest that current and former FPCU students are the passive or powerless recipients of that discourse. FPCU students are not merely subjects who were unable to muster an intellectual defense against the promotional rhetoric of those institutions; such students did not simply accept the sales pitches offered by the television advertisements and recruiters described in Chapter 3 without considering other options or weighing the costs and benefits of attending college. Their individual decisions to attend for-profit colleges are not based solely on the promotional rhetoric of FPCUs, but that is not to say that promotional discourse and surrounding discourses of the value of higher education do not play a role in their decision-making processes.

This chapter presents discourse analyses of interviews with current and former FPCU students not to understand the psychological effects of promotional discourse on particular individuals, but to identify the strains of the variety of discourses and social factors influencing

such students' decisions to enroll in FPCUs. As an interpretive approach, discourse analysis resists the impulse to look at individual responses as unique, and instead assumes that shared responses are prompted by underlying patterns of information and meaning-making. Public discourse can then be understood as a means of reproducing and challenging ways of conceptualizing and understanding the social world. Rather than speculating about the reality of people's lived experiences, discourse analysis is invested in determining the extent to which reality is constructed through social processes. The language used to frame higher education and to promote different institutions is only worthy of scrutiny insofar as it, in some way, has some impact on collective reality and subsequent representations of that reality. That is, the examples of discourse described in previous chapters—including *A Nation at Risk*, *Waiting for "Superman,"* and FPCU advertisements—are significant because they are emblematic of shifts or trends in the public's understanding and acceptance of certain linguistic representations of higher education. FPCU advertisements, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, are dependent on preceding strains of public discourse for their potency and meaning.

Cognizant of the various strains of argument about the importance of pursuing higher education and generally aware of the significant investment of time and money attending college entails, students choose to enroll in FPCUs. The current and former FPCU students interviewed cited a variety of reasons for that decision, some of which would be the same for students who choose to attend traditional colleges and universities: pressure by family members and loved ones to pursue higher education and the pursuit of self-improvement and better professional opportunities. However, the participants interviewed also chose FPCUs for reasons that are unique to such institutions (viz., frustration and dissatisfaction with traditional education; the belief that FPCUs are a more convenient alternative because they offer flexible class schedules

and allow students to graduate more quickly because of their streamlined curricula). Among the several reasons they cited for choosing to enroll in an FPCU, the students interviewed regularly conveyed that they were unqualified or under-prepared for traditional colleges or universities—“real” schools, as many participants called them.

The analyses in this chapter reveal that FPCUs incorporate elements of existing strains of public discourse about higher education in their promotional discourse, and those elements are reflected in the narratives of people who have attended FPCUs. Again, this is not to suggest that FPCU advertisements alone are effective in their attempts to recruit students; indeed, only a few participants explicitly mentioned advertisements for FPCUs as a motivating factor for attending the school, and the goal of this research is not to determine whether or not there is a causal relationship between students’ exposure to FPCU ads and their decisions to enroll at FPCUs. That said, FPCU advertisements and narratives about students’ decisions to attend FPCUs share a significant number of thematic commonalities—the strains of shared discourses: anxiety, fear, and feelings of insecurity about pursuing higher education; antipathy and frustration about the rigidity of traditional education; a desire to improve one’s life and employment prospects through higher education; and a desire to pursue higher education as quickly and conveniently as possible at an institution that is flexible enough to accommodate a busy adult’s schedule. These strains suggest that the prevailing discourses surrounding higher education—which are (re)constructed and circulated through various forms of media, including the ones discussed in this dissertation—allow FPCUs to simultaneously argue that higher education is a means to a better life while condemning the traditional options for pursuing it. The various elements that repeat in the interview responses presented in this chapter can be traced to the prevailing

discourse surrounding higher education, a discourse that is currently being revised by the neoliberal orientation that has been gaining strength since the Reagan era

Much like *Waiting for “Superman”* postures as a radical argument for education reform while positing a profit-based alternative, FPCUs—particularly before the 2008 economic recession and the recent legal actions taken against them— have taken and continue to take advantage of existing arguments for the importance of higher education as a vehicle to a more promising future and encourage prospective students to take enormous financial risks in order to pursue a fast and convenient credential. Perhaps because the importance of attending college is so deeply entrenched in public discourse as the most realistic road to success, the participants framed the financial risk of attending college as one that simply must be taken at any cost. Further, as will be discussed further in the concluding chapter, the analyses of student interviews support the notion that two-year colleges might play an important role in countering the prevailing discourses of higher education that privilege traditional universities and stigmatize other options. The participants who mentioned two-year colleges during interviews mentioned them only as sub-standard alternatives to other institutions, even FPCUs.

The Participants

Each participant arrived at FPCUs with different goals, expectations, and backgrounds. Betsy, a 43-year-old Hispanic woman and an Air Force veteran, decided to attend an FPCU after an academic advisor at a public, four-year university suggested that an institution that offered more online courses would better suit her needs. Amanda, a 27-year-old white woman who had dropped out of high school at age 16, chose to enroll in courses at an FPCU because her employer told her she needed to have an associate’s degree in order to be eligible for a raise.

Arthur, a 36-year-old African-American man with a wife and two young children, noticed that the man on the front page of an FPCU's website "looked like him." The participants are members of the first generation of college students faced with the FPCU option, and have been exposed to an unprecedented barrage of advertisements for colleges and universities and arguments about the value of higher education. As such, their interpretive frames of the value of higher education are shaped by a broader context of public discourse. The same is true, of course, of students who commit to traditional colleges and universities. However, as discussed in previous chapters, FPCUs are unique in the extent to which they use persuasive strategies to establish their public identities and recruit students. FPCUs are also more explicit in their claims that a college degree is crucial to a student's future economic success. Thus, the discursive patterns of current and former students at FPCUs offer valuable insight into the paradigm that the primary function of colleges and universities is to prepare students for the workforce, and the role of discourse in shaping students' expectations of higher education.

Following a discussion of how discourse analysis is applied to interview data is an explanation of the sample selection and interview methods. Next, segments of interviews conducted with twenty-two current and former students at FPCUs will be presented to illustrate the significance of prevailing discursive strains.

Qualitative Interviews and Discourse Analysis

In Chapter 1, *discourse* was defined as language in use and cited a definition that describes it as a phenomenon which is "interdependent with social life, such that its analysis necessarily intersects with meanings, activities, and systems outside of itself" (Schiffrin, 1994, p. 31). Cruickshank (2012), expanding on the notion that reality originates from social interaction,

defines discourse as a “structuring scheme that people utilize when they want to understand the world and themselves” (p. 39). Describing the approach to language and reality that informs the role of interviews in discourse analysis, Cruickshank emphasizes the role of the *intersubjective*—the “part of reality where we share the comprehension of phenomena” (p. 40). The intersubjective—an understanding of reality based upon shared notions of what constitutes reality—is structured by language and “originates from social interaction” (Cruickshank, 2012, p. 40). Schiffrin (1994) notes that the principle of intersubjectivity involves “the sharing of knowledge or experience” and is based on the idea that “in order for communication to proceed at all, people must share certain basic knowledge... about the world, the language to be used, and so on” (p. 389-390). Schiffrin emphasizes the importance of shared knowledge in facilitating communication and the ability of communication to create new shared knowledge. The dual role of intersubjectivity, she argues, is that “it both allows communication, and is achieved by communication” (p. 390). In this view, ideas about reality exist, but they become meaningful only when individuals share them to enact social goals and to establish a shared interpretive framework for phenomena. In discourse analysis, interviews are not sites for discovering objective truths about a particular phenomenon, since language is the mechanism by which social reality is constructed and represented. Rather, an analysis of linguistic patterns in interview data can reveal how phenomena are constructed and co-constructed through language and how individuals understand themselves and the phenomenon being investigated.

When they speak, participants “draw on culturally available resources” which the analyst can assume are “not employed exclusively in the context of interviews but have a currency beyond that setting” (Guise & Gill, 2007, p. 897). Torfing (2000) observes that an interview does not yield naturally occurring discourse “in its purest form” (p. 44). That is, interviews are shaped

by elements of the discursive situation, including the context and setting of the interview itself and the role of the interviewer. However, as discussed later in this chapter, these limitations do not necessarily result in inaccurate or fundamentally flawed data. The discourse analyst's onus is to transcribe interview data accurately, to analyze that data using a well-informed and consistent method, and to describe and account for the effect of the interview's context.

Discourse analysis of interview data allows a deeper examination of the relationship between individual narratives and the broader network of discourses examined in preceding chapters. Phillips and Hardy (2002) note that analyses of interviews can be “used to connect ‘microevents’ to broader discourses as way to show how narratives and conversations construct social experience” (p. 9). Further, they argue, discourse analysts are interested in how discourse “constitutes particular realities” and are “attuned to the co-construction of theoretical categories” (p. 10). That is, when analyzing interviews, discourse analysts acknowledge and actively engage with the complexity inherent to the social constructivist epistemology that underlies discourse analysis. Discourse analysis also reveals some of the “socially available” explanations—which are, in large part, circulated via public discourse—for why students choose particular institutions of higher education.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Because open-ended questions in semi-structured interviews are more likely than structured interviews to elicit detailed personal narratives, semi-structured (or “focused”) interviews were used as a data collection method for this project (Bryman, Lewis-Beck, and Liao, 2004). The project focuses on the power of discourse to shape individual attitudes that in turn lead to active choices, and eventually are encapsulated in personal narratives; thus, longer

and more detailed personal narratives contain more material through which the influence of public discourse can be investigated. The defining characteristic of semi-structured interviews is their “flexible and fluid structure,” which distinguishes them from structured interviews in which “a structured sequence of questions” must “be asked in the same way of all interviewees” (Bryman, Lewis-Beck, and Liao, 2004). Semi-structured interviews are common in public opinion and public policy research, since they rely on open-ended questions to elicit longer and more detailed responses than more structured interviews. While interviewers often have a list of questions prepared before a semi-structured interview, the method also allows for questions that arise naturally during the interview.

Limitations of the Qualitative Interview and Semi-Structured Interviews

Richards (2009) argues that “analysis of interviews [in the field of applied linguistics] still tends to treat [interviews] as reports rather than accounts, relying on unproblematized thematic analysis” (p. 158). While qualitative interviews give researchers the opportunity to elicit detailed personal responses from interviewees about particular subjects, interviews often result in “selected ‘voices’” being “arranged in what might be termed a journalistic tableau: there is something appealing, varied[,] and often colorful in their deployment but they tend to be presented bereft of context and methodological detail” (Mann, 2010, p. 6). Mann, citing Briggs (1986), identifies potential problems with the use of qualitative interviews in fields like discourse analysis, including the well-established concern that interviews result in a *co-construction* of meaning between interviewer and interviewee. Further, the context of the “research interview” itself entails generic limitations, since “the communicative structure of the entire interview shapes each utterance” (Briggs, 1986, pp. 102-103). Interviewers also risk stripping participants

of personal agency during the process of the interview or its transcription, since the voices of interviewees “can become decontextualized, taking the attention away from the interactional context and the role and contribution of the interviewer” (Mann, 2010, pp. 10-11).

To mitigate the effects of these limitations, some scholars have argued for a more reflexive approach in which the interviewer considers how his or her involvement might shape the interactional context and the subsequent representation of interviewees (Nightingale and Cromby, 1999; Mann, 2010). Such a shift requires the researcher to examine “the ways in which a researcher’s involvement with a particular study influences, acts upon, and informs such research” (Nightingale & Cromby, 1999, p. 28). This approach “encourages a more reflective and critical engagement with practice and process, where difficulties, confusion, and complexities” are dealt with instead of being ignored for the sake of expediency (Mann, 2010, p. 11). For example, the interviewer could explicitly address the issue of co-construction or the potentially mitigating qualities of the interactional context. Richards (2009) encourages such reflexivity and stresses “the importance of treating interviews as interactionally co-constructed events in which participant identity and positioning have significant analytical implications” (p. 14). Such reflexivity is adopted in the analytical approach to interview data in this chapter by acknowledging the role of co-construction in interactions with participants and considering how the researcher’s involvement in exchanges and subsequent analyses might shape the interpretation of responses. Furthermore, students’ interview responses are reported in context instead of appearing as isolated sections of responses that support the argument in this chapter.

Within the category of qualitative interviews, semi-structured interviews have their own set of limitations as a qualitative research method. The effectiveness of a semi-structured interview is heavily dependent upon the skills of the interviewer and the quality of the rapport

built between the interviewer and interviewee. One potential problem is that the interviewer might unintentionally give verbal or physical cues that indicate what answers he or she expects from the respondent. The most significant limitation of semi-structured interviews, though, is that “the depth of personal information” gathered during this method “may make it relatively difficult to generalize findings from a small group” (Mann, 2010, p. 11). However, the goal of this analysis is not to demonstrate that these respondents’ attitudes and experiences are representative of all, or even the majority of, FPCU students; rather, the responses included in this chapter are illustrative of the ways in which these individual students’ discourse reflects the strains of public discourse analyzed in the preceding chapters. The interview questions were not designed to elicit, identify, or measure any particular opinion or ideological orientation towards FPCUs (or higher education generally). Instead, the purpose of these semi-structured interviews was to identify the presence or absence of discursive elements that reveal the intertextuality between individual student discourse and prevalent discourses of higher education and K-12 education reform.

Participant Selection Method

Early in the research process, e-mail inquiries were submitted to two FPCUs—the University of Phoenix and Kaplan University—seeking their permission to interview current students, since the research process would have been facilitated by the cooperation of the FPCUs being researched. These two FPCUs were selected because of the significant number of students they enroll, the ubiquity of their advertisements, and the prominence of their promotional discourse in preceding chapters. The proximity of physical University of Phoenix and Kaplan University campuses also made them attractive sites for research.

Kaplan University did not respond to the initial request submitted via e-mail and did not return three subsequent telephone calls. An administrative assistant in the Office of Research Support (ORS) at the University of Phoenix replied to the e-mail with an explanation of their research protocol: The researcher, they said, was required to submit a full proposal for permission to conduct research. A proposal was prepared and submitted, and the following e-mail response was received shortly thereafter:

Thank you for submitting your research request to the University of Phoenix Office of Research Support (ORS). Your proposal will be reviewed for completeness and will then be forwarded to the Committee on Research (COR) for its review and decision. The COR generally meets the third Wednesday of each month. A written response will be provided to you within two weeks of the Committee's meeting.

A week later, the COR sent the following e-mail:

We received your research proposal to our Committee on Research. Upon initial review, we ask that you provide a more substantive and detailed explanation and description of your study in each section of the proposal and attach a copy of any survey instrument you intend to use. Please provide a literature review rather than a set of references.

In response, a longer and more exhaustive proposal was submitted to the COR, along with an explanation that the only survey instrument was include in the initial proposal, which was the list of interview questions. A month after the revised proposal was submitted, the COR sent their decision via e-mail:

Thank you for submitting your research request to the University of Phoenix Committee on Research. The committee reviewed your proposal and has denied your request for research. If you have any questions, please contact COR@phoenix.edu. Thank you for your interest.

The response from the COR posed the very real possibility that further pursuit of research approval from FPCUs would be either fruitless or unreasonably time-consuming, so interview participants were recruited using two approaches: 1) friends and colleagues of the researcher were asked to refer current or former FPCU students to the researcher, and 2) a public message

regarding the study was posted on an online message board devoted to discussing issues in the local area. To ensure that participants who had particularly positive or negative attitudes toward FPCUs were not the only people recruited, the invitation did not frame the study as one that is critical of FPCUs or their recruitment tactics. Instead, participants were informed that the study focused on FPCUs and what influenced particular students to attend them. The interviewees were not offered compensation for their participation in the study.

Once their inquiries regarding the study were satisfied, potential participants were sent a brief questionnaire asking them to specify their ethnic/racial identity, since much FPCU promotional material is oriented toward people of color. Potential participants were also asked to list their gender identity, since the promotional material also makes different appeals to male and female prospective students. Finally, potential participants were asked if they would describe themselves as “nontraditional” students based on the following criteria established in a 2002 study by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and which were listed in the questionnaire:

A non-traditional student, according to NCES, falls into at least one of the following categories:

1. Delays enrollment (does not enter postsecondary education in the same calendar year that he or she finished high school)
2. Attends part-time for at least part of the academic year
3. Works full-time (35 hours or more per week) while enrolled
4. Is considered financially independent for purposes of determining eligibility for financial aid

5. Has dependents other than a spouse (usually children, but may also be caregivers of sick or elderly family members)
 6. Is a single parent (either not married or married but separated and has dependents)
 7. Does not have a high school diploma (completed high school with a GED or other high school completion certificate or did not finish high school).
- (“Nontraditional Undergraduates,” 2012, p. 2-3)

The rationale for selecting nontraditional students is that they best represent the demographic explicitly targeted by for-profit college advertisements, as indicated by the enrollment demographic statistics at FPCUs: In 2011, 76% of FPCU students were considered financially independent, compared to 32% at public or private four-year (“traditional”) institutions; 49% claimed dependents, compared to 14% at traditional institutions; 50% were between the ages of 24 and 39, compared to 21% at traditional institutions; 14.6% completed high school with a GED or other high school completion certificate and 2.6% did not finish high school at all, while 97% of students at traditional institutions had a high school diploma (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). The internal training documents discussed at the end of Chapter 3 also make it clear that nontraditional students are the primary audience of recruitment efforts and material. One egregious example is a training document from for-profit Vatterrott College, which was released during the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee oversight hearings in 2011 and revealed a list of “sales targets” including the following groups, among others: “Welfare Mom w/Kids,” “Pregnant Ladies,” “Recent Incarceration,” “Dead End Jobs-No Future,” “College Credits – 2 Years+,” “College Freshmen dropout,” and “Living with Significant Other” (Lewin, 2012).

Based on responses to the questionnaire, the potential participants were narrowed to a convenience sample¹³ of twenty-two students, seven of whom attended a for-profit college at the time of the interview, and fifteen of whom had attended a for-profit college at some point prior to the interview. All of the participants selected met the NCES criteria for being nontraditional students during their time at an FPCU. Of the twenty-two students in the sample, twelve were women and ten were men. Participants ranged in age from 26 to 43 and resided in various geographic areas within the U.S. Four of the participants self-identified as African-American, and four self-identified as Hispanic; the remaining 14 participants self-identified as white. Some of these students had attended a physical FPCU campus, while others only took online courses at FPCUs. The size of the sample was based largely on the number of students who elected to contact the researcher. Had initial interviews failed to elicit valuable data, more participants would have been sought or the interview method would have been adjusted; however, the interviews consistently generated responses with sufficient depth and detail to warrant their inclusion in this analysis.

In invitations and IRB consent forms, participants were informed that the primary researcher was a doctoral student at a large university who was conducting research for a dissertation. Initially, there was a concern that students would be reluctant to disclose information about the institutions they attended, or that they might feel that the study itself was designed to disparage institutions believed to be less legitimate than the one represented by the researcher. However, in IRB documents and in pre-interview conversations, participants were assured that the primary focus of the project was the language used to frame the costs, risks, and

¹³ These interviewees were selected “on the basis of their accessibility or convenience” (Ross, 2005, p. 7).

benefits of attending *any* type of college or university. The participants were self-selected insofar as they agreed to participate in the research and understood its general purpose, but a wide range of attitudes toward FPCUs emerged among them; some participants defended the FPCUs they attended, testifying enthusiastically to the institutions' merits and downplaying common criticisms of them; some reported having positive experiences at FPCUs; some were critical of FPCUs and the quality of the education they received. This range of perspectives assured that participants who shared particularly negative attitudes toward FPCUs had not been selected, which would have affected the project's goal of analyzing the nature of the public discourse surrounding higher education and determining how that discourse is reflected in students' attitudes toward for-profit and non-for-profit colleges and universities.

Interview Method

Prior to any interviews being conducted, IRB approval was received from the University of Arkansas. Consent forms were obtained from all participants and IRB guidelines were followed throughout the data collection process. Participants were assured that their privacy would be protected; as such, pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to ensure anonymity and the names of the institutions the participants attended will not be disclosed.

Face-to-face interviews, which were recorded with a digital audio recorder, were conducted in several geographic locations depending on each participant's availability. None of the interviews were conducted on physical FPCU campuses, so that participants would be comfortable speaking candidly about the institutions they attended. Interviews were conducted in settings that were as comfortable and private as possible, such as study rooms in public libraries and quiet corners of coffee shops.

Interview Questions

Peterson (2000) concedes that “no formal, comprehensive theory of question wording exists” (p. 46). In fact, he argues, “there are not even well-defined principles of properly wording questions. The unique needs of each research situation make any attempt at universal rules fruitless” (p. 46). As such, there are no hard and fast rules for writing an “ideal” question; there are only basic guidelines that can help researchers write effective questions. Payne (1951) describes five basic criteria that are commonly used in the development of interview questions: questions should be brief, relevant, unambiguous, specific, and objective. According to Payne, the ideal survey question is less than twenty words long. The questions participants were asked were consistent with these criteria; the questions were clear, direct, and brief. Though initial interviews were conducted using a longer list of questions, asking fewer questions allowed participants more time and freedom to speak about their experiences and attitudes comfortably and without feeling as if they were repeating themselves. After the second interview, only the following seven interview questions were asked:

1. Tell me about the road that brought you here. How did you decide to attend college?
2. Did your parents attend college?
3. Do the people close to you support your decision to attend college?
4. What influenced your decision to the college you attend?
5. What are your goals while you’re in college?
6. What are your goals after college?
7. Did you feel prepared for college when you started taking classes?

While questions 2 and 3 are closed-ended questions that could elicit a simple “yes” or “no” answer, the remaining questions are open-ended. Open-ended questions have the advantage of “allowing respondents to express their thoughts and feelings in their own words instead of in words chosen by the researcher” (Weisberg, Krosnick, and Bowen, 1996, p. 78). While open-ended questions are more difficult to analyze, they yield more information and give the respondent more flexibility in their answers.

The interview questions fall into four overarching thematic categories: personal background, emotional motivations for attending college, economic motivations for attending college, and attitudes toward higher education. Care was taken to phrase the questions in a manner that did not suggest a bias against FPCUs; for example, though participants knew that FPCUs were a focal point of the research, the term “for-profit college”—which might carry a negative connotation or be perceived as pejorative—was not included in the interview questions, since participants were assumed to be more likely to respond honestly about their experiences with higher education if they did not need to defend their decision to attend a particular institution.

Transcription and Coding Methods

As many discourse analysts have noted, transcription and coding are, in and of themselves, interpretive processes. Gee (2014) notes that a discourse analysis is “based on the details of speech or writing that are arguably deemed relevant in the context, and [emphasis in the original] that are relevant to the arguments the analysis is attempting to make” (p. 137):

A discourse analysis is not based on all the physical features present, not even those that might, in some conceivable circumstance, be meaningful, or might be meaningful in analyses with different purposes. Such judgments of relevance (what goes into a transcript and what does not) are ultimately theoretical judgments, that is, they are based

on the analyst's theories of how language, contexts, and interactions work in general and in the specific context being analyzed. In this sense, a transcript is a theoretical entity. It does not stand outside my analysis, but, rather, is part of it. (Gee, 2014, p. 136)

Determining the level of detail to be included in a transcription—and the “carving up” of an interview into sections based on thematic content—rely on the discourse analyst's subjective interpretation of the significance of certain linguistic elements. Since these processes are critical elements of a discourse analysis, this section will present the rationale for using a “broad” (less detailed) transcription method. While detailed descriptions of speech in sociolinguistic analyses are crucial to understanding the meanings speakers convey through patterns of linguistic elements like pitch and the duration of pauses, the goal of this project's analysis is to observe patterns in content and meaning across a variety of discourses. The form that discourse takes is relevant only insofar as it contributes to the construction, reinforcement, or rejection of particular themes and attitudes about higher education.

ATLAS.ti, a qualitative analysis software, was used for assigning codes to transcribed data and for creating memos containing analyses of codes and themes. Data were analyzed by identifying and coding themes that emerged during the interpretation of the data. A system of codes was created and assigned to general patterns that arose in interviews. Briggs (1986) argues that “the interview must be analyzed as a whole before any of its component utterances are interpreted” (p. 104), since meaning is more than the sum of decontextualized linguistic parts. As such, entire interviews were analyzed and coded and the segments presented are illustrative of elements of the overall analysis. When question-and-answer pairs or segments of interviews are presented stripped from their broader context, their significance is framed within the larger context of the interview in order to situate them within the participant's overall meaning-making.

In the interview transcriptions, which are modeled after those of Jefferson (1979)¹⁴, the lines of interviews are divided into “idea units” in order to emphasize their informational function (Gee, 2014, p. 155). Within each line, the word given the most stress by the interviewee, indicated by significant pitch fluctuation and an increase in volume, is underlined. Pauses of more than two seconds are indicated by a period inside parenthesis. Interviews are divided into what Gee (2014) calls “stanzas”—“sets of lines devoted to a single topic, event, image, perspective, or theme” (p. 157). Below is a sample of transcribed interview data, which comes from a participant whose pseudonym is Cindy:

INTERVIEWER:

- 1 And what were your goals while you were enrolled at that university? The new one?

CINDY:

- 2 I wanted to really (.) push myself to be something better than I had been before.
- 3 A lot of this was growing up and maturing,
- 4 but the first college had such little positive impact.

In line 2, Cindy’s volume and pitch increased when she used the word “really”; she put more stress on that word than any other word in that particular idea unit, and she paused for three seconds after saying “really.” Cindy’s response is divided into three idea units (lines 2, 3, and 4): In line 2, Cindy focuses on the idea of self-improvement; in line 3, she shifts to her process of growth and maturity; and in line 4, she returns to an earlier discussion of the FPCU in which she

¹⁴ A full list of transcription conventions is included in Appendix B.

was enrolled and the idea that attending the college did not benefit her personally or professionally.

In interview transcriptions, information recorded in field notes about participants' paralinguistic communication during interviews, such as gestures, is included in double parentheses when the participant's nonverbal communication was essential to the meaning they were attempting to convey. What follows is an example of the transcription of such information:

CINDY:

5 I decided two years later to enroll at a university.

INTERVIEWER:

6 A different university?

CINDY:

7 Yeah. Well, a university, right? ((laughs))

8 A big—((extends her arms to indicate a large size)) a real university, I guess you'd say.

While Cindy verbally conflates the size of a university and its legitimacy—that is, a “big” university is a “real” university—the gesture she uses in line 8 illustrates the emphasis that Cindy placed on that idea. Further, lines 7 and 8 represent different idea units, since Cindy—who previously attended an FPCU—sarcastically suggests in line 7 that the FPCU she attended was not a university at all, and in line 8, she expresses the idea that a large university (perhaps one that takes up a significant amount of physical space) is more legitimate.

Themes in Participant Responses

Analyses of interview data will begin with a list of the recurring themes that emerged in participants' responses, followed by excerpts from interviews that illustrate those themes.

Following the four aforementioned categories of interview questions—personal background, emotional motivations for pursuing higher education, economic motivations for pursuing higher education, and attitudes toward higher education—subcategories of themes that emerged in participants' responses were established, along with specific themes within those subcategories:

Category 1: Personal background

Sub-category 1: Family

Themes: Family support (+)¹⁵

Family support (-)

Family's educational history

Sub-category 2: Personal relationships

Themes: Friends' educational experiences

Support from friends/social support (+)

Support from friends/social support (-)

Category 2: Emotional motivations for pursuing higher education

Sub-category 1: Positive emotional motivations

Themes: Ambition

Confidence

Sub-category 2: Negative emotional motivations

¹⁵ Where applicable, a plus sign next to a theme indicates the participant's positive attitude toward the subject; a minus sign indicates the participant's negative attitude toward the subject. For example, *Family support (-)* indicates that the participant expressed a lack of family support or antipathy from family members.

Themes: Frustration

Guilt

Feelings of failure

Insecurity/self-doubt

Regret

Category 3: Economic motivations for pursuing higher education

Themes: Poor economic conditions nationwide

Attended FPCU to improve job prospects

Attended traditional university to improve job prospects

Category 4: Attitudes toward education

Sub-category 1: Attitudes toward FPCUs

Themes: Convenience (time, location) (+)

Satisfaction with academic program (+)

Satisfaction with academic program (-)

Satisfaction with support from faculty (+)

Satisfaction with support from faculty (-)

Satisfaction with support from administrators/recruiters (+)

Satisfaction with support from administrators/recruiters (-)

FPCUs as “only option”

FPCUs as “not a real college”

FPCUs as “scams”

Poor reputation of FPCUs

Sub-category 2: Attitudes toward “traditional universities”/non-FPCUs

Themes: Traditional university as “real university”

Large university as “real university”

Personal/social benefits of attending traditional university

Better reputation of traditional universities

Traditional university as too time-consuming

Traditional university as inconvenient (time, location)

While each of these themes will not be discussed in depth, this chapter presents examples of recurring discursive elements in participants’ responses that are illustrative of the themes that were identified during analysis.

Family and Family Expectations

The majority of interview participants reported having support from family members when they decided to attend college, even if their family members were not college graduates themselves. However, many participants discursively framed the involvement of family members in the decision to attend college as “expectations,” which ultimately became a matter of personal agency. Many participants alternately described their decision to attend college as an individual one and as a decision they were pressured into by family members. Rebecca, a 27-year-old African-American woman who briefly attended a for-profit college after attending a community college for two years, explained that although her close family members had not attended college, they pressured her to attend:

REBECCA:

- 1 I was told by my mother that I could either go to college or start working,
- 2 and for what I wanted to do (.) I needed a college degree.

- 3 I have a handful of cousins who went to college,
4 but neither my parents nor my aunts and uncles went to college.
5 My parents coerced me into community college,
6 where I only had to purchase my books out of pocket
7 due to a—I had a full scholarship for 2 years.
8 But (.) yeah—everyone supported my decision.

In line 2, Rebecca tries to maintain agency over her decision to attend college—“For what I wanted to do, I needed a college degree”—but her response reveals various sources of pressure and expectations that influenced that decision. In line 1, she says that her mother established the two options for what Rebecca could pursue: work or college. Further, she “needed” a degree in order to pursue her professional goals, so the expectations of the workforce were also strong motivating factors. After explaining that most of her family members had not attended college, Rebecca uses a surprisingly strong word to describe the pressure from her family to attend community college: “coerced” (line 5). Rebecca used that word, perhaps, because of the stigma surrounding community colleges and the popular characterization of these institutions as substandard. By saying she was “coerced” to attend a community college, Rebecca distances herself from that stigma. Although she mentions the full scholarship she was awarded, at no point in her response does she describe the role she played in the decision to attend community college. When she discusses her experiences at an FPCU, however, the language she uses to describe the decision-making process is quite different:

REBECCA:

- 9 [Name of community college] was good and all.
- 10 The program for what I was—the hospitality program was good.
- 11 The teachers—everyone, all the instructors, they were great.
- 12 And I had the scholarship, so that was a real—I was proud of that.
- 13 But once I was there, it seemed like everyone was like,
- 14 “So (.) when are you gonna be done?”
- 15 ((mimics tapping on a wristwatch)) Anytime now.” ((laughs))
- 16 And around that time, I talked to a friend of mine who did classes at [name of FPCU]
- 17 and she told me, “You gotta—this is a lot faster.”
- 18 She was doing something different, you know, but she liked the classes.
- 19 So I quit [name of community college]. My parents saying, you know, I’m crazy.
- ((laughs))
- 20 But it seemed best for me, and I knew I had control of that decision.
- 21 It was my life.
- 22 So (.) [name of FPCU] was real, you know, they emphasized it would be fast.
- 23 It seemed expensive, but the package seemed like,
- 24 “Oh, man, I could get a job anywhere.”

In this excerpt, Rebecca’s language shifts from that of a passive recipient of the actions and influences of others—“I was told” (line 1); “My parents coerced me” (line 5)—to that of an active subject making her own decisions: “I quit” (line 19); “I knew I had control” (line 20); “It was my life” (line 21). She describes that sense of agency after laughing about leaving the

community college that her parents had “coerced” her to attend. Rebecca’s response invokes discursive strains in FPCU advertisements about the expediency of attending institutions that are not beholden to the limitations of “traditional” education; though she expresses satisfaction with the community college she attended, the network of expectations and tensions surrounding her decision to attend college led her to follow the lead of a friend who was “doing something different” (line 18).

Christopher, a 32-year-old white man who attended a for-profit art college at the time of our interview, revealed a similar tension in his responses:

CHRISTOPHER:

- 1 My father had no money growing up,
- 2 so he joined the Navy and eventually rose to a very successful place in the ranks.
- 3 My mother, all she wanted to do was have kids.
- 4 But they—yeah, they expected me to go.
- 5 Everyone was supportive.
- 6 That might be—well, it’s what everyone around me wanted to see me do.
- 7 So I guess it was expected of me where I came from.
- 8 I really wanted to get away from the problems of the wealthy people in Connecticut.
- 9 There was a lot of drugs there (.) which was cool ((shrugs)) as a teenager,
- 10 but sad sometimes.
- 11 I felt very watched over my whole life,
- 12 I felt smothered.
- 13 I was expected to go to college so I used it as my escape.

In this excerpt from Christopher's response, he uses the word "expected" three times, referring to his family and the people around him. However, by describing college as a means of getting out of a bad situation, he tries to shift the agency for the decision back to himself: "I really wanted to get away" (line 8), "I used it as my escape" (line 13). Similar to Rebecca, Christopher describes himself as asserting agency by enrolling in a for-profit college instead of the type of institution his parents expected him to attend. Christopher begins by constructing a narrative in which he resists the expectations of the people around him—"they expected me to go" (line 4); "It's what everyone around me wanted to see me do" (line 6); "I guess it was expected of me" (line 7)—but finishes this narrative by saying that he used those expectations as a springboard for making an "escape" (line 13). These discursive strains are evocative of those in FPCU advertisements that characterize potential FPCU students as renegades who pursue education in their own way.

Hank, a 36-year-old white man who pursued his master's degree at a for-profit college after earning his bachelor's degree at a public four-year university, mentions his family members' expectations:

INTERVIEWER:

1 I'd like to know about the role higher education has played in your life.

2 Can you tell me about the path that brought you here?

HANK:

3 Sure. So going to college was something that I was always expected to do

4 once I graduated from high school.

5 My parents were college-educated—

6 my mom has a master's in nursing, and my dad has a bachelor's in IT.

7 So it was only normal for me to continue school.

Hank describes college as something he was “expected to do” (line 3), but attributes that expectation to his parents’ education (“My parents were college-educated,” line 5; “So it was only normal for me to continue school,” line 7). Regardless of whether or not their parents or family members had attended college, participants almost universally described the expectation that they should attend college as a strong motivating factor. They would often try to describe the decision as one they had made themselves as an attempt to either wrest agency from the people around them or to establish their power to make their own decisions, but ultimately, participants constructed narratives that emphasized the role of expectations. Sometimes, as in the cases of Christopher and Hank, there was no clear subject behind the expectations for participants to attend college. Christopher says “it was expected of [him] where [he] came from” and that “[he] was expected to go to college”; Hank says “going to college was something [he] was always expected to do” and “it was only normal for [him] to continue school.” In these instances, the expectations are not coming from any specific individual; rather, it seemed that participants were culling these expectations from nebulous and pervasive public discourses that position higher education as a critical stepping stone toward prosperity and success.

It is slightly surprising that nontraditional students decide to attend FPCUs as a response to the expectations of family members, since promotional discourse so emphatically strives to frame the prospective student as a maverick bucking traditional education and the conventional path to success. This analysis suggests, however, that FPCUs are conscious of the pressures surrounding prospective students and that they take those pressures into consideration when creating promotional material.

While advertisements for FPCUs often depict students as isolated individuals forging their own path in a world that has very low expectations for them, the participants who were interviewed understood college as an inevitable and essential experience in order for them to be successful, which they often framed as familial expectations. The fact that they were expected to attend college by those around them reveals a new layer of FPCUs promotional strategies: Often, advertisements and recruitment strategies reveal an assumption on the part of FPCUs that prospective students understand the expectations from those around them that they should attend college. FPCUs' promotional discourse often echoes the prodding of family members and friends in order to convince prospective students to enroll.

Advertisements like "Thinking Ahead" that feature the proud parents of successful children, for example, are designed to make the prospective student realize that FPCUs offer a path to fulfilling the expectations of her family. But many participants described the decision to attend an FPCU as one that allowed them to regain control of the experience of pursuing higher education. While participants did not explicitly connect these attitudes with FPCUs' promotional discourse, they pick up a prominent discursive strain in FPCU advertisements: The FPCU option is a radical, cutting-edge alternative to the deficient model of traditional education, and prospective students can feel as if they are meeting their families' expectations in an unorthodox way—in their *own* way, perhaps—by attending an FPCU, which allows them to reclaim agency over their lives and decisions. An exchange with Cindy, a 31-year-old Hispanic woman who attended an FPCU, illustrates this idea:

CINDY:

- 1 There were also not a bunch of ((mimics quotation marks with her hands)) gen ed¹⁶
classes
- 2 so (.) I took classes focused directly on my major. It seemed perfect to me.
- 3 Several people, ((sighs)) including my parents, suggested I try another school
- 4 and that they didn't think this was going to be a good fit.
- 5 But I was rebellious ((laughs)) and their concerns made me want to do it even more.

INTERVIEWER:

- 6 I totally get that. ((laughs)) Sounds like me, really.

CINDY:

- 7 You get it. ((laughs))

INTERVIEWER:

- 8 Totally. Whatever my parents expected me—I wanted to do—

CINDY:

- 9 The exact opposite. ((laughs)) Right?

Though Cindy expresses a desire to pursue higher education at an institution that seemed “perfect” to her (line 3), she acknowledges that her family's expectations played a role in her decision-making process: Her family’s concerns that the FPCU she attended would not “be a good fit” for her actually contributed to her decision to enroll there as a way of asserting her own agency and, as she puts it, rebelling (lines 4-5). Though Cindy did not mention promotional

¹⁶ “Gen ed” refers to “general education” courses, which many other participants referred to as “the basics.”

discourse in her interview, she echoes sentiments expressed by many FPCUs in their advertisements and direct student recruitment discourse: “Traditional education is not for everyone”; “you are not just a hamster in a wheel”; “there is a different kind of university that is uniquely catered to your needs.”

One might assume that family expectations are a minor factor in nontraditional students’ decisions to attend college. After all, these students are not teenagers making the transition directly from high school to college; indeed, enrolling in college later in life often entails significant disruptions to one’s life and a substantial financial commitment, so the decision to “return” to school would seem to be an individual one, or perhaps one made with the support of a partner or spouse. However, several participants constructed narratives of pressure, expectations, and a desire to both satisfy their family members’ expectations while exercising their own freedom to attend the institution of their choice.

Personal Relationships and the “Traditional” College Experience

While participants described the involvement of their family members as “expectations” or “pressure,” they characterized the involvement of friends and people in their social circles much differently. In most interviews, the topic of relationships with friends was intertwined with conceptions of the “traditional” college experience, which—as will be explained later in this chapter—most respondents expressed a sense of “missing out on” by attending an FPCU. Cindy told me the following when discussing her experiences after graduating from an FPCU:

CINDY:

- 1 And my friends were all now graduating with Bachelor’s degrees

- 2 and landing great jobs.
- 3 And they had fun stories about activities and groups they had joined and
- 4 they made connections and had references and resources and
- 5 had developed great relationships.
- 6 So I learned a lot, but I was never made to push myself to be better
- 7 or to try for anything bigger. ((sighs))

Cindy mentions several aspects of the traditional four-year college experience that she believes she did not get: participating in on-campus activities, joining on-campus groups, making professional connections, meeting people who could act as references, having access to on-campus resources, and developing relationships. Her experience at an FPCU, she says, gave her the opportunity to “learn a lot,” but she was “never made to push [herself] to be better” (line 6). While she does not mention who failed to “push [her] to be better,” she seems to implicate FPCUs for the lack of networking opportunities, group affiliations, and extracurricular activities they provide. The sense of “lacking” or “missing out” that she describes is a product of her relationships with people in her social circle who did attend traditional universities. Amanda, a 27-year-old white woman who attended online and on-campus classes at an FPCU ten years after dropping out of high school at age 16, said the following during her interview:

AMANDA:

- 1 I felt really disconnected.
- 2 Like, not part of the school at all.
- 3 Even when I went down there—

- 4 I never felt like I had any connection to the place.
- 5 There was something about (.)
- 6 Like, I don't know—I know this is dumb, but, no sports teams.
- 7 Football, basketball. Nothing to cheer for, whatever.
- 8 Like, the [name of FPCU], who cares?
- 9 No, you know, homecoming parades.
- 10 I was never in a sorority like some of my friends were.
- 11 I don't know. I felt like I missed a lot.
- 12 When I'd see them—

INTERVIEWER:

- 13 Them—your friends? Sorry to—

AMANDA:

- 14 No, you're fine—my friends, yeah, my friends.
- 15 I'd see them and think, I'm not going to tell them anything.
- 16 Nothing about school. It was too embarrassing.
- 17 Most people from my high school went to [public research university]
- 18 And knew I'd dropped out, so (.)
- 19 That was embarrassing already.
- 20 They had sweatshirts with the logo, you know, hats.
- 21 I don't have a sweatshirt with [name of FPCU]. ((gestures to her shirt)) ((laughs))
- 22 Have you—I mean, have you ever seen someone wearing that?

In Amanda's account, her concerns about not feeling "connected" to the FPCU she attended the way other people are "connected" to traditional universities are associated with her sense of "missing" certain social opportunities and the ability to associate her identity with a particular institution. She bemoans the fact that she cannot cheer for a football team, belong to a sorority, or wear a sweatshirt bearing the logo of the FPCU she attended. Twice, she describes the idea of being associated with an FPCU as "embarrassing" (lines 16 and 19), even likening it to the stigma of having dropped out of high school (line 18).

Gee's (2014) notion of "figured worlds" is useful in an analysis of this interview data. Gee compares a "figured world" to a "picture of a simplified world that captures what is taken to be typical or normal" (p. 89). Gee compares figured worlds to Fillmore's (1975) idea of "frames," in which words or phrases come to serve as (often oversimplified) conceptual stand-ins for more complex ideas. Holland et al. (1998) describe figured worlds:

[A figured world is] a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others. Each is a simplified world populated by a set of agents who engage in a limited range of meaningful acts or changes of state as moved by a specific set of forces. (p. 5)

While Gee acknowledges that figured worlds are not static—what is considered typical or normal varies depending on context and the social and cultural realities of participants—he argues that the figured worlds described or invoked in responses and what the words and phrases of responses are "assuming or inviting listeners to assume" can be useful analytical tools (p. 90). Figured worlds are populated by "participants, activities, ways of interacting, forms of language, people, objects, environments, institutions, [and] values" (p. 90); further, they serve an intermediary function between micro-level social interaction and macro-level discourses created

by institutions. They “mediate between local interactional work” and “Discourses¹⁷ as they operate to create the complex patterns of institutions and cultures across societies and history” (Gee, 2014, p. 95). The common strains found in public discourse about higher education and participants’ interview responses work together to construct the figured world higher education and the concomitant expectations of what college will be like.

Also useful in this analysis of interview data is Gee’s (2014) idea of “prototypical simulations,” which support figured worlds. Prototypical situations are “the sorts of simulations [people] run in [their heads] of something like weddings, marriages, committee meetings, romance, and families when [one] take[s] the situation to be ‘typical’” (p. 99). As is the case with figured worlds, prototypical simulations vary across cultural and social contexts—an affluent American couple’s prototypical simulation of a wedding would be significantly different from that of a couple living in Mumbai—but such simulations are efficient insofar as they “help us go through life without having to think out everything consciously” (Gee, 2014, p. 100). Along with that efficiency, however, comes a tendency to take certain aspects of prototypical situations and figured worlds for granted. Since figured worlds exist in metaphors and the discourses of media and other people, they can create (potentially partial, conflicting, or inconsistent) heuristics for understanding certain situations, concepts, and institutions that are difficult to counter or disrupt with competing ideas or understandings. Amanda’s prototypical simulation of the college experience is populated by sports, parades, sweatshirts with logos, and sororities. Amanda

¹⁷ Gee (1999) distinguishes between “discourse”—language in use—and “Big ‘D’ Discourse,” a term intended to reflect “the ways in which people enact and recognize socially and historically significant identities or ‘kinds of people’ through well-integrated combinations of language, actions, interactions, objects, tools, technologies, beliefs, and values” (p. 143).

mentions that “some of her friends” were members of sororities, but the other elements of college life she mentions are based on what she has read, heard, or seen in public discourse.

During the interviews, many other participants summoned discursive strains that idealize the four-year, residential college experience. Thus, while students are often attracted to FPCUs because of the non-traditional nature of their programs—a quality FPCUs tout in their promotional discourse—the discursive strain that idealizes what Rudolph (1991) calls the “collegiate way” still has a firm grip on the American imagination about what college should be:

The collegiate way is the notion that a curriculum, a library, a faculty, and students are not enough to make college. It is an adherence to the residential scheme of things. It is respectful of quiet rural settings, dependent on dormitories, committed to dining halls, permeated by paternalism. It is what every American college has had or consciously rejected or lost or sought to recapture. (p. 87)

When FPCU discourse maligns the traditional university experience, the characterization of traditional education as outdated, inconvenient, and inflexible is at odds with many students’ belief that the elements Rudolph describes are what make a university *real*. Though the collegiate way itself and the residential model it embodies have long been challenged by the “commuter model” of higher education, FPCU discourse especially aims to benefit from decrying the antiquated nature of the residential model, even as it embodies what students expect from higher education. At least some of the low retention rates at FPCUs could be explained by the hypothesis that when students enroll in college, they have a specific heuristic, which has been constructed by discourse of higher education in America since its inception, of what college will be (and should be). Even though FPCUs argue that they are the education of the future, their students often long for the college experience of the past.

Emotional Motivations for Pursuing Higher Education

Some participants cited positive emotional motivations for deciding to enroll in college: a desire for self-improvement, a sense of ambition, and confidence. The structure of FPCUs and their academic programs seemed to bolster many participants' confidence, but that confidence was tempered by their assumption that there were limited options available for them to pursue higher education. Arthur, a 36-year-old African-American man, said that he was excited about the challenge of beginning to take online courses in business through an FPCU:

ARTHUR:

- 1 I hadn't been in a classroom since—well, for almost fifteen years.
- 2 So the fear was there, you know, that I couldn't hack it.
- 3 But I really—you know, I say that, but I felt good. ((laughs))
- 4 I felt ready, and I didn't have to go back in a classroom.
- 5 I was just ((mimics typing on a keyboard)) in front of the computer, you know.
- 6 I could be anybody. I felt like, yeah, this is a short program, and
- 7 I was—I was ready for it to be tough, but I knew I could do it.

Arthur's response about his attitude toward attending an FPCU is not focused on his abilities; instead, he navigates a series of emotions. Every line of his response includes an example of what Gee (2014) calls "I-statements"—statements in which the speaker refers to herself or himself in the first person as "I" (p. 173). Gee establishes categories of I-statements, four of which are relevant to an analysis of Arthur's response: cognitive statements, in which the speaker talks about thinking and knowing ("I think..."); affective statements, in which the

speaker talks about emotional desire (“I want...”); state and action statements, in which the speaker talks about a particular action they have taken or their current state (“I am...,” “I did...”); and ability and constraint statements, in which the speaker discusses his or her ability or inability to do something (“I have to...,” “I can...,” “I can’t...”).

Arthur uses a constraint I-statement in line 2, emphasizing the word “hack,” suggesting an apprehension about his ability to succeed: “The fear was there... that I couldn’t hack it.” In lines 3 and 4, he uses positive affective I-statements: “I felt good”; “I felt ready.” Line 4, however, reveals one of the reasons for Arthur’s confidence; he says, “I didn’t have to go back in a classroom.” Arthur emphasizes not wanting to return to a classroom in an attempt to distance himself from the sense of being a remedial student. In line 1, he says that he “hadn’t been in a classroom... for almost fifteen years,” meaning that the most likely venue for him to return to college would be a community college. The sense of “going back” to a classroom, for Arthur, is laden with fears of revisiting past failures; when Arthur says, “I didn’t have to go back in a classroom. I was just in front of the computer... I could be anybody” (lines 4-6), he alludes to the fact that he will not have to return to a community college classroom and be associated with the students there, thus avoiding the sense of being a remedial student and distancing himself from the stigma of those institutions. Instead, he is in front of a computer, which he casts as positive; a couple of positive affective I-statements follow his statement about being in front of a computer: “I was ready”; “I knew I could do it” (line 7). Instead of being in the remedial and shameful space of the classroom—a place Arthur does not want to “go back” to—he is in front of a computer and engaging with technology while pursuing his education. Computers are, after all, the means by which current business is done; Arthur feels capable in front of a computer (or, at least, he is able to sidestep the stigma and fear of returning to a classroom).

An overwhelming number of participants cited negative emotional motivations for pursuing higher education: frustration, guilt, feelings of failure, and insecurity. These participants overwhelmingly associated those feelings with their decision to “settle” on attending an FPCU. In one of his responses, Hank said, “I knew [the FPCU] was a for-profit school, but I had limited options for my career.” One excerpt from my interview with Cindy illustrates the relationship between negative emotions and the decision to enroll at an FPCU:

CINDY:

- 1 Well, uhh, I attended a very small high school,
- 2 and the idea of going to a big—a very large university was,
- 3 you know, scary and overwhelming.
- 4 I wanted to go into a program for art, but ((laughs)) I wasn't any good at it.
- 5 Okay, let me say, I wasn't any good at creating it.
- 6 I can understand and (.) appreciate it,
- 7 and I enjoy studying art, but I just can't (.) create it.
- 8 So ((sighs)) I looked into several colleges with great art programs,
- 9 but they all wanted a portfolio, which I did not have.
- 10 And around that time I came across a college that was being marketed as
- 11 an ((mimics quotation marks with her hands)) art college.

In lines 4-7, Cindy frames herself as someone with limited skills, deciding to pursue an art program while saying she “wasn’t any good at” art (line 4). In line 7, her self-doubt about her abilities is clear and definitive: “I just can’t create it.” In Cindy’s telling, because she did not

have a portfolio, she was unable to enroll in “colleges with great art programs” (lines 8-9). She then describes the way she found the FPCU she ultimately attended, citing the way the college “marketed” itself as an “art college” (lines 10-11). Cindy’s cynicism about the FPCU was clear during her interview; while using “air quotes,” she said the phrase “art college” in a sarcastic tone. While her circumstances were different—her employer at a customer service call center told her that she needed an associate’s degree to be eligible for a raise—Amanda described her decision to attend an FPCU in a similar way:

AMANDA:

- 1 I was so (.) friggin’ disappointed in myself,
- 2 so angry with myself for flaking out, for dropping out.
- 3 Like, I couldn’t handle high school.
- 4 And—like, who can’t handle high school?
- 5 So what hope is there, right?
- 6 But ((shrugs)) I wanted the money,
- 7 and I did like the idea of going back to school, I guess,
- 8 But I would liked to go to a good one.
- 9 But [name of FPCU] said they could get me through the GED,
- 10 and promised up and down, [voice rising in pitch] “Oh, this will be the best thing.
- 11 Oh, this is the fastest way. Aren’t you glad we’re here?
- 12 What an ((claps her hands once)) awesome opportunity for you, blah blah.”

Amanda expresses some interest in higher education—“I did like the idea of going back to school, I guess” (line 7)—but in her narrative, her frustration about the practical limitations that led her to attend an FPCU is clear. The disappointment and anger she feels about dropping out of high school, which is how she begins her discussion about which school she decided to attend, seem to exacerbate the frustrations she voices later in the excerpt. Early in her response, Amanda echoes strains of public discourse that characterize high-school dropouts as incapable of pursuing higher education (lines 3-5). The sentiment that college is an obstacle preventing her from earning more money is consistent with her lived experience—she needed a degree in order to be eligible for a raise—but her response reflects the same anxieties Arthur expressed about being a “remedial” student.

Prior to her discussion of the FPCU she attended, Amanda uses a series of negative affective I-statements: “I was so friggin’ disappointed in myself, so angry with myself” (lines 1-2); “I couldn’t handle high school” (line 3). After she mentions her need for money and the FPCU she attended, her statements place the FPCU in the subject position: “[the institution] said”; “[the institution] promised” (lines 9-10). She even mimics the promises of FPCU recruiters in a sarcastic tone: “Aren’t you glad we’re here?”; “What an awesome opportunity for you” (lines 11-12). While Amanda recognizes that it is imperative for her to attend college and that going to college, like graduating from high school, is expected of successful people—an idea circulated in popular discourse surrounding higher education—her options for colleges to attend were extremely limited. Her discursive framing of her frustration with the FPCU itself was echoed by all but four participants and quickly emerged as the most prominent recurring theme in the interviews.

Attitudes toward FPCUs

Though there were a few exceptions—like Arthur, who seemed somewhat satisfied with his experience at an FPCU and felt that he developed the skills he needed for his career—participants overwhelmingly framed their experiences at FPCUs as negative for a variety of overlapping reasons. They cited the poor reputation of such schools, the unfulfilled promises of recruiters and marketing materials, and the high cost of academic programs. Cindy was reluctant to mention the name of the FPCU she attended (even though I informed her that the name of the institution would be redacted in my project); she mentioned that the institution “gets a lot of heat” and did not seem to want to add fuel to the fire, claiming it “wasn’t a bad place” (lines 9 and 10). But she ultimately expressed regrets about the reputation of the institution and how she believed it affected her ability to find a job:

CINDY:

- 1 My parents supported my decision to go to college,
- 2 but not that college.
- 3 They wanted me to go somewhere with a better reputation
- 4 and would give me more opportunities.

INTERVIEWER:

- 5 But you went to the—to which college?

CINDY:

- 6 [Name of FPCU]
- 7 I feel bad—I don’t want to (.) call them out or anything.

INTERVIEWER:

8 Call them out?

CINDY:

9 Well, they get a lot of heat—

10 It isn't a bad place. It just (.) wasn't for me.

11 And it's mostly that (.) after graduating, I had a hard (.) time finding a job.

12 A lot of interviewers asked questions about the college

13 and I felt that (.) in general (.) I wasn't getting offers

14 because they felt I wasn't going to be as qualified as

15 someone from a bigger university or college.

While Cindy creates a narrative that communicates mindfulness about not directly criticizing the FPCU she attended, she acknowledges that the reputation of the FPCU compared to a “bigger university or college” affected the way potential employers viewed her. She does not blame herself for employers viewing her education as substandard; rather, she says, “[Employers] felt [she] wasn't going to be as qualified” as people who attended other schools. Cindy's use of the word “felt” implies that their judgment was not based on logic or a reasonable consideration of the school but on an instinctual reaction to the reputation of the FPCU she attended. Interviewees rarely offered concrete details about the institutions they attended, the curricula of the academic programs, or their day-to-day experiences attending college, which confirms the role of widely circulated and shared discourses on individuals' perception of social phenomena. Other participants, however, were more direct in their criticism of the FPCUs they attended:

REBECCA:

- 1 They had an accredited program
- 2 for what I thought was a program I wanted to go into.
- 3 They advertised night and weekend classes so working people could continue to work.
- 4 But, see, the thing is—they made you do an internship. Okay?
- 5 They did mention the internship,
- 6 but they did not mention it would be nearly impossible
- 7 to find one with evening or weekend hours. ((shakes head slowly))
- 8 And—right, I was working.
- 9 When I asked for advice, they'd say,
- 10 “Oh, lots of students rearrange their work schedules,
- 11 Or they even leave their jobs to complete their degree.”
- 12 Well, I couldn't—((scoffs)) My job was under contract,
- 13 so I couldn't change my hours,
- 14 And I wasn't about to put myself in more debt
- 15 to live off of my student loans,
- 16 when I knew my future pay would not cover that debt.
- 17 Everyone I talk to about college,
- 18 I tell them never, (.) ever go to a for-profit school.

Betsy, a 43-year-old Hispanic woman and an Air Force veteran who decided to attend an FPCU after an academic advisor at a public, four-year university suggested that an FPCU would better suit her needs, voiced similar frustrations:

BETSY:

- 19 I always heard, “college, college, college,”
- 20 and my friends would say, “Man, hey, if you’re a veteran, they want you.”
- 21 Okay, sure, so they want to help me. I have the G. I. bill, sure they do. ((laughs))
- 22 But the lady at [public university] said, “Well, you looked at [name of FPCU]?
- 23 They got (.) online classes,
- 24 get done with it real fast,” all that.
- 25 I thought—shoot, if they’re suggesting it—
- 26 I thought [name of FPCU] was bullshit, but (.) okay, I guess.
- 27 But they gave me—nothing but the run-around from the first time I called them.
- 28 They told me the nursing program was nine months, okay? ((laughs))
- 29 Nine months! I said, “I can be an R.N.?”
- 30 “Oh, yeah.” ((waving her hands dismissively))
- 31 “Okay, in nine months?”
- 32 “Sure.”
- 33 Well, you know, fool me—((laughs))
- 34 They got me there.
- 35 And what my G. I. Bill wouldn’t cover—
- 36 “Hey, take out the loans, man!”
- 37 I’ll never pay those loans back.
- 38 I’ll never be able to. I mean, never.
- 39 And I quit going to classes after (.)

- 40 A year and a half.
- 41 I kept thinking, “Maybe I’m too slow.
- 42 I should be done by now.”
- 43 But no, nobody was.
- 44 They gave us reasons to keep going—
- 45 “Oh, you only have two classes, three classes.
- 46 Why would you quit now?”
- 47 So ((shrugs)) they do a number on people. I’m telling you.
- 48 I wish I’d done college sometimes, but it’s too late now, I think.
- 49 Wasted so much time.

Rebecca and Betsy’s narratives both include their retellings of claims made by FPCU recruiters and reflect their disappointment and frustration with the failure of FPCUs to fulfill their promises.

Conclusion

Throughout the interviews conducted in this study, participants delivered narratives that reflect how thoroughly popular conceptions of the value of higher education are entrenched in public discourse. Those conceptions emerged in the interviews as discursive strains approximating the status of truisms about the value of higher education—that a college education essential in order to be perceived as a successful adult, if not to actually be one; that attending a college which enacts the “collegiate way” is a social rite of passage; that a four-year residential stint at a traditional university constitutes attending a “real college.” Since the participants had

only anecdotal evidence from their lived experiences to support these purported truisms, my analysis supports the idea that people circulate the same ideas about higher education that are reinforced by various forms of media. Based on these interviews, I conclude that the rhetorical strategies used to “sell” FPCUs are deeply problematic for two reasons: First, even in light of recent attempts by legislators and U.S. Senate committees to publicly undermine the legitimacy of FPCUs, students feel compelled to attend college; troublingly, they feel compelled to attend *any* college, including FPCUs. Even when students are aware of the poor reputation and high cost of FPCUs, the discourse that frames higher education as an essential stepping-stone to successful adulthood is a powerful counterweight. Second, the rhetoric that promotes FPCUs is also used to denigrate and stigmatize institutions like two-year colleges, which entail far less financial risk and are often as convenient for students as FPCUs.

Furthermore, in light of this interview data, I conclude that direct student recruitment strategies, which have largely been the focus of government investigations into the practices of FPCUs, are deeply insidious, seductive, and deserving of the criticism and scrutiny they receive. While FPCU advertisements package these institutions as compelling alternatives to traditional colleges and universities, they do not seem to be nearly as convincing to students as the assurances made by FPCU recruiters and academic advisors. Many participants mentioned the false promises, exaggerated claims, and outright dishonesty of FPCU administrators and recruiters, and these bad experiences with FPCUs often encouraged them to forego college altogether. Participants did not explicitly mention advertisements in their interviews, but their responses reflected the overall discursive “packaging” of FPCUs, which is a dynamic process involving advertisements and direct student recruitment strategies working together to form a phenomenon unique to FPCUs.

The final chapter of the dissertation is devoted to reflection and calls for change. I will reflect on the role language plays in “selling” college to a new generation of prospective college students; I will reflect on the role colleges play as literacy sponsors, and how that role bestows them with the duty to create socially responsible public discourse about the risks and benefits of attending college. Furthermore, I also make recommendations that envision a radical rhetorical counter-framing of higher education, one that leaves room for students to engage in an open and honest discussion of their options, free from the interests of the institutions that might want to recruit them. To conclude my discussion of student interviews, I present an excerpt from my interview with Rebecca that ends with a haunting and poignant question:

REBECCA:

- 1 I am without a degree now,
- 2 I’m in debt,
- 3 and considering going back to school for an entirely different field.
- 4 So when I look back on it, it’s—why?
- 5 What was the use of that?

Chapter 5

Conclusions, Implications, and Suggestions

In December 2015, the comedy website CollegeHumor released a two-minute-long YouTube video starring First Lady Michelle Obama and *Saturday Night Live* star Jay Pharoah. The video, titled “Go to College,” was released in conjunction with Obama’s “Better Make Room” campaign, an initiative designed to encourage Americans between the ages of 14 and 19 to pursue higher education (Edelman, 2015). Partnering with a number of popular social media sites like Vine and Mashable, Better Make Room aims to “[make] sure that young people understand the steps, tools and resources available to help them Reach Higher [*sic*], such as registering for the SAT and ACT, visiting a college campus, filling out FAFSA [forms], and completing at least four college applications” (“Fact Sheet: Better Make Room,” 2015).

In “Go to College,” Michelle Obama, standing in a makeshift recording studio in the White House, raps as photographs of Chicago and her college graduation appear on the screen:

South Side Chicago, we all know

We had to do overtime very night to make it to tomorrow

Obama continues as footage of President Obama’s 2008 inauguration ceremony appears:

And everyone could really make their dream true

Hey, kid listenin’ in Michigan: That could be you

Later in the video, Obama and Pharoah rap the chorus together:

Wanna fight crime? You should go to college

If you wanna write rhymes, fill your head with knowledge

If you wanna stare at grass, don’t go to college

But for everything else, you should go to college

If you wanna fly jets, you should go to college

Reach high and cash checks? Fill your head with knowledge

If you wanna watch paint, don't go to college

But for everything else, you should go to college

As Obama raps, Pharaoh throws dollar bills into the air; when Obama and Pharaoh rap the lyrics “reach high and cash checks,” the pair appears as the portrait on a \$100 bill.

The message of the video—and the larger campaign it represents—is an important one: Young people, particularly those from economically disadvantaged families, should feel empowered to pursue higher education and understand the steps necessary to do so. However, the video’s message raises a number of concerns addressed in this dissertation: As Obama and Pharaoh tout the money college graduates can earn alongside images of dollar bills and diplomas, college education is presented as a necessary and inevitable path to success. Coupled with the pro-privatization discourse that questions the ability of public education to meet Americans’ needs, such a message opens the door for institutions with seemingly innovative curricula to recruit underprepared students at the latter’s financial peril.

At the core of “Go to College,” the Better Make Room campaign, and the promotional discourse of FPCUs is a critical assumption about the value of higher education, an assumption premised on the dual tenet that college is a prerequisite for economic success in America and that college is a worthwhile investment at any cost. Year after year, data appear to support this assumption; for instance, although in 2012 only 34% of American workers had earned at least a bachelor’s degree, 53% of the total U.S. wages that year were claimed by college-educated workers (Department of Commerce, 2013). Since the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, the artifacts analyzed in this project have introduced and sustained strains of public discourse that

support a myth about the value of higher education and the purported role of college in our society. However, public debates about the rising costs of higher education and the impending student debt crisis threaten to dispel the myth of the indisputable value of college.

Myths, according to Graff (2010), are modes of interpretation and narration that cannot be wholly false; for myths to gain acceptance, they must have some basis in reality. The myth that higher education inevitably leads to economic success is no different. What that myth fails to address, though, is an increasingly salient aspect of pursuing higher education: Enrolling in college entails tremendous risks for students. In June 2014, *The Economist* reported that U.S. student loan debt had swelled to \$1.2 trillion dollars, and that seven million people's student loans were in default. At the time of this writing, student loan debt is the largest source of consumer debt in the United States, topping credit card debt and home loans. In 2013, the six-year graduation rate for first-time undergraduate students who attended four-year institutions was 59%; at for-profit institutions, that rate was only 32% ("Institutional Retention," 2015).

Graff (1979) defined the highly influential notion of the "literacy myth" – the idea that literacy and education, achieved through individual effort, can "reduce the effects of ascribed social and structural inequalities" (p. 640). The literacy myth, circulated in various forms of public discourse, frames education and the acquisition of literacy as automatic paths to upward social mobility. The persistence of the literacy myth, Graff argues, "mandates critical exploration of the relationships between and among material reality, social relationships, institutions, policy, expectations, and social theory" (p. 638). Indeed, the most significant barrier to individual achievement is social inequality based on class, ethnicity, race, and gender; literacy does not exist in a vacuum, and cannot realistically be expected to act as a panacea or culprit for inequality. Graff (2010) suggests that the literacy myth persists because of a collective hope that

literacy alone is enough to cure social ills and eliminate inequality. By scapegoating literacy and oversimplifying the causes of economic inequality, we obscure the real nature of systematic injustice (p. 645). It is a comfort to policymakers—and perhaps to the public generally—to imagine that individual failures can be blamed on laziness, lack of effort, or an unwillingness or inherent inability to develop literacy. If that were true, those of us who have attended traditional universities could avoid an uncomfortable glance into the mirror and an acknowledgement of what has facilitated our own success.

Instead of looking inwardly or scrutinizing myths about the value of higher education, most policymakers and pundits perpetuate the idea that college is a prerequisite for meaningful participation in American society. While campaigns like Better Make Room and President Obama's American Graduation Initiative urge all Americans to pursue higher education, the University of Phoenix and other FPCUs engage in aggressive recruiting and advertising tactics to persuade prospective students that traditional education is inefficient and outmoded. The continuing denigration of public education in popular discourse, alongside funding cuts that lead to spikes in tuition at public universities, creates an environment in which privately funded educational institutions are more attractive options for students. While FPCUs are investigated, punished, and admonished by politicians and the media, for-profit institutions continue to advertise and recruit through traditional media and online channels, with the latter being far more likely to reach prospective students. If students speak directly to FPCU recruiters, they are exposed to even more insidious rhetorical strategies, as was detailed in chapter 3. Thus, if students are simply urged to attend college regardless of the type of institution, campaigns like Better Make Room run the risk of inadvertently leading students to enroll in FPCUs.

More importantly, however, these campaigns forego a more nuanced discussion of the options available to prospective students. While the alternatives—including vocational training and two-year colleges—are sensible routes to a career, public discourse upholds the superiority of the four-year, residential college experience over seemingly remedial or substandard options. Those options are associated with the declining quality at all levels of American schools, students, teachers, graduates, and workers. In *Waiting for “Superman,”* for example, Guggenheim argues that a public school that has failed to send its graduates to four-year colleges has failed the community it serves. If we are to succeed as individuals and as a nation, according to the myth, we must reach higher, and there is no loftier or more laudable goal than a college degree.

The literacy myth and the myth of the unimpeachable value of higher education both rely on narratives of decline. The narrative of decline presented in *Waiting for “Superman”* and other media representations of education parallels a myth of the decline of literacy—a decline that, according to Graff, is “unsupported by empirical evidence” but maintains potency in popular discourse. The mechanisms by which such ideas are sustained and influence our material reality is at the foundation of this inquiry. Public discourse about college encourages people to take risks while failing to mention that going to college is a risk at all.

In a discussion of the rhetorical negotiation of risk, consumer credit cards provide a valuable point of contrast. In 2009, President Obama passed the Credit Card Accountability, Responsibility, and Disclosure Act (CARD) in order to establish standards for honest practices for credit card companies and to mitigate financial consequences for consumers who use credit cards. Among the provisions of the CARD Act is a set of restrictions on how credit card companies are allowed to court young Americans:

No credit card may be issued to, or open end consumer credit plan established by or on behalf of, a consumer who has not attained the age of 21, unless the consumer has submitted a written application to the card issuer that meets the requirements of subparagraph (B). (HR 627, 2009)

Further, the CARD Act specifically restricts the ability of credit card companies to lure college students:

No card issuer or creditor may offer to a student at an institution of higher education any tangible item to induce such student to apply for or participate in an open end consumer credit plan offered by such card issuer or creditor, if such offer is made—
 (A) on the campus of an institution of higher education;
 (B) near the campus of an institution of higher education, as determined by rule of the Board; or
 (C) at an event sponsored by or related to an institution of higher education. (HR 627, 2009)

These protections for young consumers and college students were celebrated in media responses.

An article in the *New York Times* extolled the provision preventing credit card companies from marketing to students on college campuses: “Banks will no longer find it useful to plant themselves at tables outside the student union, luring innocent freshmen with offers of free sandwich coupons or T-shirts in exchange for completed credit card applications” (Schultz, 2010). In a press release, Gail Cunningham, a spokesperson for the National Foundation for Credit Counseling (NFCC), said the following:

Building a positive credit history while in college can certainly help the young professional move on with his or her post-graduation life. On the flip side, abusing credit can work against a person when trying to land a job, lease an apartment or buy a vehicle. (National Foundation for Credit Counseling, 2010)

These provisions rest, in part, on the assumption that young people and college students are not savvy enough to make financial choices that might result in accumulating large amounts of debt. They also serve as an acknowledgement that college students in particular are at risk for putting themselves in financial hardship, perhaps because most students have limited financial means while they are enrolled in college and assume that they are guaranteed a high-paying job when

they graduate, thus justifying the decision to borrow money. If credit card companies cannot prey on young people or students on college campuses because that population is perceived to be particularly vulnerable to financial risk, it makes little sense that FPCUs—or, for that matter, private lenders—can. So thoroughly is a college degree rhetorically framed to be a safe and worthwhile investment that the consequences of accruing debt in the process are not addressed in a substantial way. In this light, of messages, such as “Go to College,” that omit crucial caveats about the financial burdens linked to higher education, current public discourse reduces higher education to little more than a straightforward means for young people to “reach high and cash checks.”

By definition, the primary goal of for-profit colleges is to make a profit. As such, as long as students are willing to enroll, FPCUs cannot be expected to alter their recruiting discourse unless legal action compels them to do so. To place the onus of reorienting the national conversation about college on FPCUs would be a fool’s errand. However, the recent popular, scholarly, and political attention being directed at public two-year colleges suggests that this segment of higher education strata may be key in radically reframing the rhetoric of higher education. While scholarly work encouraging the promotion of two-year colleges has been produced by (and intended for) people involved in education policy, two-year colleges are in a position to broaden the scope of that audience by informing the general public of their role in society, and, in the process, creating a different discursive stream that reinvigorates the appeal of public, state-funded, institutions of higher education in the eyes of prospective students and their parents. A four-year university experience should, of course, be accessible to any American who wishes to pursue it; however, until four-year universities—particularly public institutions—are

more affordable (or subsidized student loans are offered at lower interest rates and with more flexible repayment plans), students should be aware of the most economical alternative.

This course of action would be particularly effective in the wake of the Obama administration's efforts to support two-year colleges. In September 2015, President Obama announced a proposal to allow Americans to attend community college for two years for free (Smith, 2015). A White House press release characterizes two-year colleges as crucial players in the American economy:

[Community colleges] feature affordable tuition, open admission policies, flexible course schedules, and convenient locations. Community colleges are particularly important for students who are older, working, or need remedial classes. Community colleges work with businesses, industry and government to create tailored training programs to meet economic needs like nursing, health information technology, advanced manufacturing, and green jobs. ("Building American Skills," 2015)

The affordability of community colleges is among the institutions' strongest selling points, and that affordability could be emphasized in the kind of discursive counter-framing here envisioned. In the wake of the 2008 economic recession, young people are mindful of their personal finances and increasingly unwilling to go into debt. A recent study found that Americans between the ages of 21 and 34 are "diligent in paying down debt, careful with credit cards and dedicated to accumulating savings"; 46% of respondents in the study defined financial success as "being debt-free" (Deluca, 2016). The major exception to this demographic's reluctance to accrue debt seems to be higher education. However, they might be amenable to a counter-framing of higher education that candidly addresses the risks of accumulating student loan debt and a discussion of affordable and efficient options for pursuing higher education. Such rhetorical reframing of community colleges could enter public discourse via advertisements created by the institutions themselves, discussions initiated at high schools, or efforts like the Better Make Room campaign.

Curiously, Better Make Room—Michelle Obama’s project—does not have a clear relationship with President Obama’s community college initiative. Since Better Make Room is designed to reach young people via social media, the campaign would be an ideal platform for a rhetorical framing of community college as a wise investment for particular student populations. The campaign’s weakness is that it does not encourage a consideration of what kind of college experience is best suited for individual students, and the argument made in the campaign is that *any* college is better than no college at all. More often than we would care to admit, that is not the case. Prospective college students are constantly exposed to FPCU advertisements that manipulate existing strains of public discourse about the importance of pursuing higher education to convince vulnerable Americans to enroll. If those prospective students express even mild interest in a FPCU—by calling a toll-free number or submitting a request for information on a website—they are subjected to aggressive and personal one-on-one sales pitches. Until other types of institutions can counter the powerful discourse of FPCUs, or there are more stringent limitations on how FPCUs can recruit students, students who are urged to get a college degree from any institution are in danger of pursuing a costly, time-consuming, and potentially worthless one.

Another aspect of the reframing of the current discourse undermining higher education is a public discussion about why we value a college degree, and to what extent we, as a country, are willing to invest in institutions of higher learning. The private sector has intensified the demand for college degrees, but we would benefit from a discussion of a four-year college degree imparts upon graduates that the private sector values. What about a college degree justifies its status as a prerequisite for entry-level positions? The argument that college fosters critical thinking or bestows students with well-roundedness rings hollow in the age of privatization, in which liberal

arts curricula are discursively and materially devalued. Perhaps a student's ability to "stick to" a lengthy academic program demonstrates her personal mettle, or perhaps a college degree establishes a level of disciplinary mastery; perhaps employers have simply fallen into the habit of "keeping up" with competitors by requiring job applicants to have college degrees, much like public universities build lazy rivers and install tanning beds in an attempt to remain relevant players in a competitive landscape. If higher education—even within the paradigm that frames college as a career-training site—has intrinsic economic value, we should question why public colleges and universities strain under slashed budgets.

This project was crafted within the walls of a university, but my hope is that it reaches beyond them. Research about the consequences of the linguistic framing of education that only reaches people within institutions of higher education would be an insular pursuit; scrutiny of public discourse that does not attempt to effect positive change for the people affected by that discourse would be, at the very least, a sterile exercise. Thus, future research in the rhetoric of education policy should be oriented toward civic engagement and attempts to offer the American people the opportunity to participate in a more comprehensive and honest discussion about what we value about college and why. American students should understand what they are investing in when they undertake the risk of a college education, and they should have the opportunity to weigh that investment against other options. Until a social and economic climate exists that allows every American the opportunity to pursue a college education without risk, students deserve more than a well-packaged and slickly marketed bill of goods.

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Appendix A: Internal Training Documents

Student Profiles


- 
- Welfare Mom w/Kids
 - Recent High School Graduates
 - College Freshmen dropout.
 - Pregnant Ladies
 - Recent Divorce
 - Military - Active & Retired
 - Low Self-Esteem
 - Low Income Jobs
 - Vocational Rehabilitation
 - Experienced a Recent Death
 - Experienced a Recent Birth
 - Empty Nest Syndrome
 - Recent Marriage
 - Relocation
 - Career Change
 - Upgrade Skills
 - Physically/Mentally Abused
 - Recent Incarceration
 - Drug Rehabilitation
 - Dead End Jobs-No Future
 - College Credits - 2 Years+
 - Living w/multitude of Families
 - Living with Parents
 - Living with Significant Other
 - Fired / Lay off
 - Self Employed w/ No Benefits

Figure 1. “Student Profiles” training document used by Vatterott Educational Centers.

Reiterating the Objective of the Call:

As I stated a moment ago, our objective today is to become better acquainted. First, I want to know more about you - your hopes, dreams, goals and perhaps even fears. Does that sound fair?

Rubric Attribute – Objective of the call

TRANSITION: The best way for me to assist you today is to find out a bit more about you and your goals, together we'll determine the right next steps.

UNCOVERING THE PAIN AND THE FEAR

- How long has this been a goal of yours? When did you first realize this is the direction you wanted to move in?
- What has stopped you in the past? What has changed from the past? Why will now be different?
- Whose life would this impact, besides you?
- Who will be the most proud at your graduation? (PDL opportunity)
- What do they think? What did they say?
- How will graduating and pursuing this career change things for you and your family?

Affected Rubric Attributes –

1. Asks probing questions to explore student motivation
2. Empower the student to respond/ Advisor Call Control
3. Active Listening
4. Advisor picks up on buying signals
5. Build/ Maintain Rapport w/Prospect

•Reality Check! – So why haven't you taken these steps yet? BE SILENT HERE

IT IS ALL ABOUT UNCOVERING THEIR PAIN AND FEARS. ONCE THEY ARE REMINDED OF HOW BAD THINGS ARE, THIS WILL CREATE A SENSE OF URGENCY TO MAKE THIS CHANGE.



Figure 2. “Pain and Fears” training document used by Kaplan University.



2. Pain Funnel and Pain Puzzle

Eight Questions

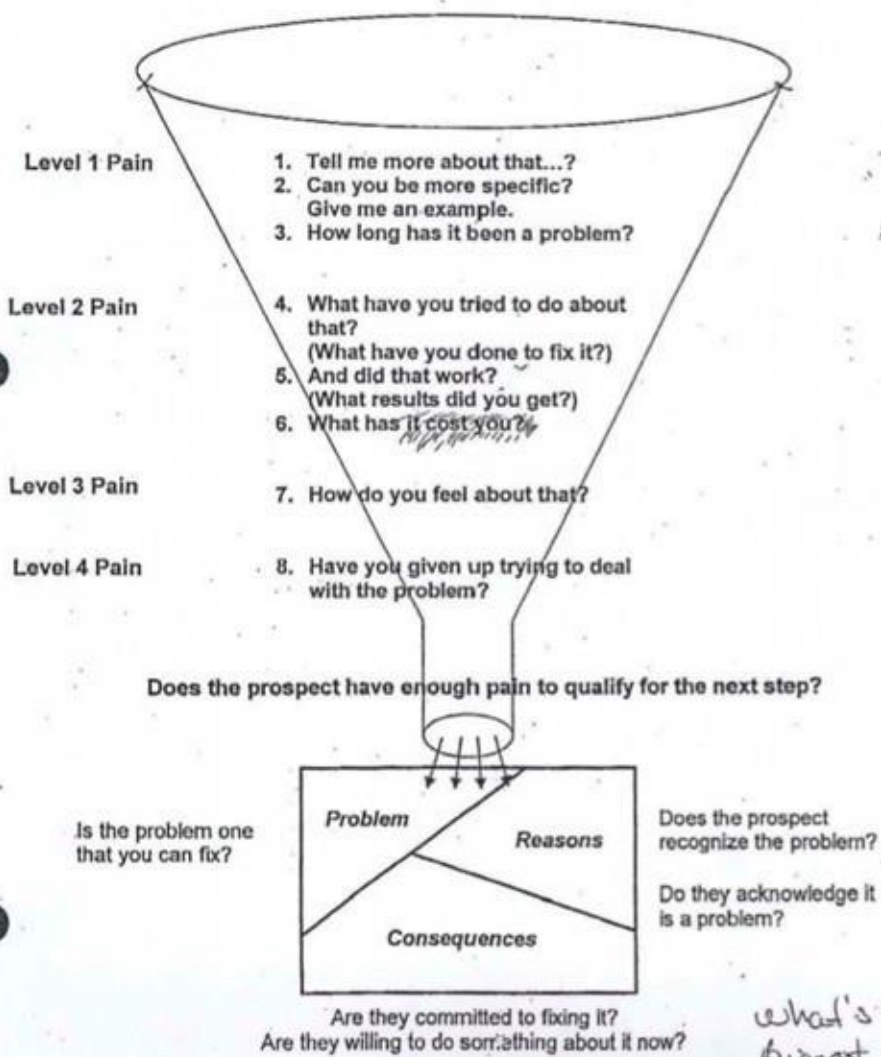


Figure 3. "The Pain Funnel" training document used by ITT Technical Institutes.

Appendix B: Transcription Conventions

- (()) Double parentheses indicate the transcriber's description of paralinguistic behavior
- (.) Short pause
- . "Sentence-final" falling intonation at end of phrase
- ? Rising intonation at end of phrase
- ! Forceful intonation at end of phrase

Adapted from the Jefferson (1979) system

Appendix C: Institutional Review Board Protocol Forms

IRB Project Number

UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD PROTOCOL FORM

The University Institutional Review Board recommends policies and monitors their implementation, on the use of human beings as subjects for physical, mental, and social experimentation, in and out of class. . . . Protocols for the use of human subjects in research and in class experiments, whether funded internally or externally, must be approved by the (IRB) or in accordance with IRB policies and procedures prior to the implementation of the human subject protocol. . . . Violation of procedures and approved protocols can result in the loss of funding from the sponsoring agency or the University of Arkansas and may be interpreted as scientific misconduct. (*see Faculty Handbook*)

Supply the information requested in items 1-14 as appropriate. **Type** entries in the spaces provided using additional pages as needed. In accordance with college/departmental policy, submit the original **and** one copy of this completed protocol form and all attached materials to the appropriate Human Subjects Committee. In the absence of an IRB-authorized Human Subjects Committee, submit the original of this completed protocol form and all attached materials to the IRB, Attn: Compliance Officer, ADMN 210, 575-2208. Completed form and additional materials may be emailed to irb@uark.edu. The fully signed signature page may be scanned and submitted with the protocol, by FAX (575-3846) or via campus mail.

1. Title of Project: "Selling College: Student Recruitment, Student Expectations, and the Rhetoric of Higher Education"
2. (Students **must** have a faculty member supervise the research. The faculty member must sign this form and all researchers and the faculty advisor should provide a campus phone number.)

	Name	Department	Email Address	Campus Phone
Principal Researcher	<u>Paige Hermansen</u>	<u>English</u>	<u>[REDACTED]</u>	<u>[REDACTED]</u>
Faculty Advisor	<u>Dr. Elías Domínguez Barajas</u>	<u>English</u>	<u>[REDACTED]</u>	<u>[REDACTED]</u>

3. Researcher(s) status. Check all that apply.

☐ Faculty
 ☐ Staff
 ☒ Graduate Student(s)
 ☐ Undergraduate Student(s)

4. Project type

☐ Faculty Research
 ☒ Thesis / Dissertation
 ☐ Class Project
 ☐ Independent Study /
☐ Staff Research
 ☐ M.A.T. Research
 ☐ Honors Project
 Educ. Spec. Project

5. Is the project receiving extramural funding? (Extramural funding is funding from an external research sponsor.)

☒ No
 ☐ Yes. Specify the source of funds

IRB Project Number

6. Brief description of the purpose of proposed research and all procedures involving people. Be specific. Use additional pages if needed. (**Do not** send thesis or dissertation proposals. Proposals for extramural funding must be submitted in full.)

Purpose of research:

The overall purpose of my research is to trace the historical trajectory of the rhetoric about higher education and its impact on our current understanding of the value of higher education in American society. Of particular interest to me is the "education reform" movement, which pushes for alternatives to public schools and the privatization of American education. As such, the goal of my qualitative research is to determine how advertisements for colleges and universities, those institutions' officially sanctioned statements of educational policy and philosophy, and arguments in the media and in popular culture about the value of college all influence students to attend different types of institutions of higher education. A few questions guide my research:

1. What motivates students to attend the types of institutions they do?
2. How do students at different types of institutions view themselves as belonging to a community of scholars?
3. What do students believe higher education will allow them to do in the future, and how do those expectations vary depending on the type of institution a student attends?

Procedures involving people:

Through audio-recorded interviews with students in Northwest Arkansas colleges, I plan to collect oral literacy narratives—narratives in which "students are asked to tell about and reflect upon their experiences with reading and writing" (Williams 2003, p. 342)—from first-year students at public and private four-year universities, for-profit colleges, community colleges, and technical colleges and explore what motivates students to attend different types of institutions. How do the ways colleges market themselves and articulate their purpose to the public influence the way students understand the value of higher education? How do other forms of public discourse—such as political speeches, books, and films—change students' expectations of higher education? Using discourse analysis—a qualitative approach influenced by linguistics and sociology which "seek[s] to describe the ways of speaking associated with particular speech communities and to understand the role of language in the making of societies and cultures" (Trappes-Lomax 2008, p. 137)—as my analytical methodology, my interpretation of the interviews I collect will be guided by questions about how students have internalized the larger public argument about the purpose of higher education. Rather than simply "extract" information from students, I hope to hear their stories and engage in a conversation with them about their relationship with the institutions they attend and how they see themselves as scholars.

In order to conduct my research, I have made tentative arrangements with Dr. Jake Stratman at John Brown University, Dr. Toni Jaudon at Hendrix College, and Dr. Audrey Hall at Northwest Arkansas Community College, who have agreed to recruit students from first-year writing courses to participate in interviews. I will follow the necessary IRB procedures at these three institutions. In the Fall of 2013, I will interview five students from each institution. I will explain the purpose of my research to my participants, explain my Informed Consent form and ask students to give their permission to use their interview data in my research, and make audio recordings of narratives from students in 45-60 minute sessions. The interviews will be semi-structured, so I will ask questions intended to elicit personal narratives about higher education; broadly, my goal is to ask students what community they see themselves as belonging to, and what community higher education will help them join. My informed consent form makes students aware that I might contact them for follow-up interviews during the course of my study.

Dr. Stratman at JBU, Dr. Jaudon at Hendrix, and Dr. Hall at NWACC have all requested that I secure IRB approval from the University of Arkansas before going through the IRB process at those institutions. As such, I will submit IRB approval from cooperating institutions as soon as that approval is granted from those institutions.

Trappes-Lomax, Hugh. "Discourse Analysis." *The Handbook of Applied Linguistics*. Ed. Alan Davies and C. Elder. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2004. 133-64. Print.

Williams, Bronwyn T. "Heroes, Rebels, and Victims: Student Identities in Literacy Narratives." *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 47.4 (2003): 342-345. Print.

7. Estimated **number of participants** (complete all that apply)

_____ Children under 14 _____ Children 14-17 _____ UA students (18yrs and older) 15 Adult non-students

8. Anticipated dates for contact with participants:

First Contact: August 2013

Last Contact: August 2014

9. Informed Consent procedures: The following information must be included in any procedure: identification of researcher, institutional affiliation and contact information; identification of Compliance Officer and contact information; purpose of the research, expected duration of the subject's participation; description of procedures; risks and/or benefits; how confidentiality will be ensured; that participation is voluntary and that refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which the subject is otherwise entitled. See *Policies and Procedures Governing Research with Human Subjects*, section 5.0 Requirements for Consent.

- ☒ Signed informed consent will be obtained. **Attach copy of form.**
☐ Modified informed consent will be obtained. **Attach copy of form.**
☐ Other method (e.g., implied consent). **Please explain on attached sheet.**
☐ Not applicable to this project. **Please explain on attached sheet.**

10. Confidentiality of Data: All data collected that can be associated with a subject/respondent must remain confidential. Describe the methods to be used to ensure the confidentiality of data obtained.

All information will be kept confidential. Collected data will only be accessible to the principal researcher and will be stored in a secure area (password-protected computers and locked offices). All identification of participants, names of specific institutions, specific people mentioned in the data, and work locations will be protected through the use of pseudonyms. The audio-recorded material will be transferred from a digital audio-recorder to a computer after each interview and then deleted from the portable device.

11. Risks and/or Benefits:

Risks: Will participants in the research be exposed to more than minimal risk? ☐ Yes ☒ No Minimal risk is defined as risks of harm not greater, considering probability and magnitude, than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests. Describe any such risks or discomforts associated with the study and precautions that will be taken to minimize them.

There is no risk of harm greater, considering probability and magnitude, than that ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests.

Benefits: Other than the contribution of new knowledge, describe the benefits of this research.

The benefit of participating in this study is the opportunity for the participants to actively reflect on their experiences as first-year college students as they work to make sense of their role in the specific institution they attend and their expectations about what possibilities higher education will create for them. Reflective practice is a key foundation to new learning and understanding. Additionally, all three institutions—JBU, NWACC, and Hendrix—have expressed interest in my research proceeds, since the narratives I record from students will undoubtedly help these institutions better understand the expectations of their first-year students.

12. Check all of the following that apply to the proposed research. Supply the requested information below or on attached sheets:

- ☐ A. Deception of or withholding information from participants. Justify the use of deception or the withholding of information. Describe the debriefing procedure: how and when will the subject be informed of the deception and/or the information withheld?
☐ B. Medical clearance necessary prior to participation. Describe the procedures and note the safety precautions to be taken.
☐ C. Samples (blood, tissue, etc.) from participants. Describe the procedures and note the safety precautions to be taken.

- ☐ D. Administration of substances (foods, drugs, etc.) to participants. Describe the procedures and note the safety precautions to be taken.
- ☐ E. Physical exercise or conditioning for subjects. Describe the procedures and note the safety precautions to be taken.
- ☐ F. Research involving children. How will informed consent from parents or legally authorized representatives as well as from subjects be obtained?
- ☐ G. Research involving pregnant women or fetuses. How will informed consent be obtained from both parents of the fetus?
- ☐ H. Research involving participants in institutions (cognitive impairments, prisoners, etc.). Specify agencies or institutions involved. Attach letters of approval. Letters must be on letterhead with original signature; electronic transmission is acceptable.
- ☐ I. Research approved by an IRB at another institution. Specify agencies or institutions involved. Attach letters of approval. Letters must be on letterhead with original signature; electronic transmission is acceptable.
- ☐ J. Research that must be approved by another institution or agency. Specify agencies or institutions involved. Attach letters of approval. Letters must be on letterhead with original signature; electronic transmission is acceptable.

13. Checklist for Attachments

The following are attached:
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Consent form (if applicable) or
<input type="checkbox"/> Letter to participants, written instructions, and/or script of oral protocols indicating clearly the information in item #9.
<input type="checkbox"/> Letter(s) of approval from cooperating institution(s) and/or other IRB approvals (if applicable)
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Data collection instruments (Questionnaire)

14. Signatures

I/we agree to provide the proper surveillance of this project to insure that the rights and welfare of the human subjects/respondents are protected. I/we will report any adverse reactions to the committee. Additions to or changes in research procedures after the project has been approved will be submitted to the committee for review. I/we agree to request renewal of approval for any project when subject/respondent contact continues more than one year.

Principal Researcher

[Redacted Signature]

Date

[Redacted Date]

Faculty Advisor

[Redacted Signature]

Date

[Redacted Date]

PROTOCOL APPROVAL FORM

(To be returned to IRB Program Manager with copy of completed protocol form and attachments)

Human Subjects Committee Use Only (In absence of IRB-authorized Human Subjects Committee, send protocol to IRB.)

Recommended Review Status

9 Human Subjects Committee can approve as exempt because this research fits in the following category of research as described in section 9.02 of the IRB policies and procedures (**Cite reasons for exempt status.**):

Printed Name and
Signature of the HSC Chair _____ Date _____

**

9 Expedited Review by a designated member of the IRB because this research fits in the following category of research as described in section 9.03 of the IRB policies and procedures (**Cite reasons for expedited status.**):

Printed Name and
Signature of the HSC Chair _____ Date _____

9 Requires Full Review by the IRB because this research fits in the following category of research as described in section 9.04 of the IRB policies and procedures (**Cite reasons for full status.**):

Printed Name and
Signature of the HSC Chair _____ Date _____

IRB/RSCP Use Only

Project Number _____ Received RSCP _____

Sent to: _____ Date: _____

Final Status

9 Approved as **Exempt** under section 9.02 of the IRB Policies and Procedures (**Cite reasons for exemption.**):

9 Approved as **Expedited** under Section 9.03 of the IRB Policies and Procedures because (**Cite reasons for expedited status.**)

Printed Name and
Signature: _____ Date _____
IRB (for the Committee)

9 Approved by **Full** review under Section 9.04 of the IRB as meeting requirements of the IRB Policies and Procedures.

Printed Name and
Signature: _____ Date _____
IRB Chairperson

Paige M. Hermansen

University of Arkansas

Department of English

“Selling College: Student Recruitment, Student Expectations, and the Rhetoric of Higher Education”:

Student Interview Questions

1. Tell me about the road that brought you here. How did you decide to go to college?
2. Did your folks go to college?
3. Do the people close to you support your decision to attend college?
4. Why did you decide to attend this college?
5. Did you consider attending any other colleges before choosing this one?
6. What are your goals while you're in college?
7. What are your goals after college?
8. How will college help you achieve your goals?
9. Did you feel prepared for college when you started taking classes here?
10. What community do you belong to now?
11. What community will you belong to when you finish college?



Department of English • Fulbright College of Arts & Sciences
Kimpel Hall 333 • Fayetteville, Arkansas 72701 • (479) 575-4301 • (479) 575-5919 (Fax)

Principal Researcher: Paige Hermansen
Faculty Advisor: Dr. E. Domínguez Barajas

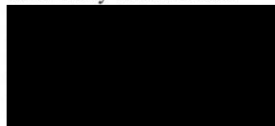
INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

You are invited to participate in a research study designed to examine students' motivations for attending particular institutions of higher education. Specifically, the study seeks to understand how students from different types of institutions see themselves as members of scholarly communities and what role they expect higher education to play in their lives and careers. Through interviews with first-year students, the researcher hopes to gain a better understanding of what students expect when they enter an institution after high school and how those institutions are meeting their expectations; further, the researcher hopes to learn how first-year writing courses accommodate and negotiate students' various needs and expectations. You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a first-year student enrolled in a first-year writing course, and, as such, you are in a position to contribute to our understanding of this issue.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE RESEARCH STUDY

Who is the Principal Researcher?

Paige M. Hermansen, Doctoral Student
Department of English
University of Arkansas



Who is the Faculty Advisor?

E. Domínguez Barajas
Director, Program in Rhetoric & Composition
Department of English
University of Arkansas



What is the purpose of this research study?

The overall purpose of this research study is to understand how students' narratives about higher education reflect the popular rhetoric about higher education and the value of higher education in American society. As such, the goal of the study's qualitative research is to see how certain types of colleges and universities, as well as arguments in the media and in popular culture about the value of college, influence students to attend different types of institutions. A few questions guide this research:

1. What motivates students to attend the types of institutions they do?
2. How do students at different types of institutions view themselves as members of a scholarly community?
3. What do students believe higher education will allow them to do in the future, and how do those expectations vary depending on the type of institution a student attends?
4. How do first-year writing courses accommodate and negotiate students' various needs and expectations?

Who will participate in this study?

First-year students from Northwest Arkansas Community College, Hendrix College, and John Brown University who are currently enrolled in a first-year writing course will participate in this study.

What am I being asked to do?

Your participation in the study will require a willingness to participate in a semi-structured interview with the principal researcher in which you share your thoughts and feelings about higher education and what motivated you to attend your institution. The interview will be non-evaluative in nature, as the researcher is interested in understanding your reasons for attending your institution and what you hope to achieve by pursuing higher education. As such, you should be willing to engage in informal, open-ended, non-evaluative conversations with the researcher. These conversations will be audio-taped and will last between 45 minutes and an hour in length. Brief follow-up interviews may be requested and conducted after the initial interview.

What are the possible risks or discomforts?

There are no anticipated risks involved in participating in this research project. To ensure your anonymity, you will be referred to in all subsequent written reports by a pseudonym. Likewise, the researcher will use pseudonyms to refer to the school you attend, and to people you happen to refer to in the course of the interview.

What are the possible benefits of this study?

The benefit of participating in this study is the opportunity to reflect actively on your experiences as a first-year student as you adjust to attending a new institution.

How long will the study last?

The study will last from Fall 2013 to Fall 2014.

Will I receive compensation if I choose to participate in this study?

No, you will not be compensated for your participation in the study.

Will I have to pay for anything?

No, there are no costs associated with your participation in the study.

What are the options if I do not want to be in the study?

If you do not want to be in this study, you may refuse to participate. Further, you may refuse to participate at any time during the study. Your relationship with your institution will not be affected in any way if you refuse to participate.

How will my confidentiality be protected?

All information will be kept confidential. Collected data will only be accessible to the researchers and will be kept in a secure area (password-protected computers and locked offices). All identification of participants, specific people mentioned in the data, and institutions will be protected through the use of pseudonyms.

Will I know the results of the study?

Throughout the study, the researcher will share interpretations of the data collected with you so that you can help us gauge the extent to which our interpretations approximate your own understanding of what it means to be a first-year college student and what influenced your decision to pursue higher education. At the conclusion of the study, you will have the right to request feedback about the findings from the researchers. You will receive a copy of this form for your files.

What do I do if I have questions about the research study?

You have the right to contact the Principal Researcher or Faculty Advisor for any concerns that you may have. You may also contact the University of Arkansas Research Compliance office listed below if you have questions about your rights as a participant, or to discuss any concerns about, or problems with the research.

Ro Windwalker, CIP
Institutional Review Board Coordinator
Research Compliance
University of Arkansas
120 Ozark Hall
Fayetteville, AR 72701-1201
479-575-2208
irb@uark.edu

I have read the above statement and have been able to ask questions and express concerns, which have been satisfactorily responded to by the investigator. I understand the purpose of the study as well as the potential benefits and risks that are involved. I understand that participation is voluntary. I understand that significant new findings developed during this research will be shared with the participant. I understand that no rights have been waived by signing the consent form. I have been given a copy of the consent form.

 Printed Name of Participant

 Signature of Participant

 Date

 Printed Name of Principal
Researcher

 Signature of Principal
Researcher

 Date

Appendix D: Institutional Review Board Protocol Approval Letter



Office of Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board

July 24, 2013

MEMORANDUM

TO: Paige Hermansen
Elías Domínguez Barajas

FROM: Ro Windwalker
IRB Coordinator

RE: New Protocol Approval

IRB Protocol #: 13-06-739

Protocol Title: *Selling College: Student Recruitment, Student Expectations, and the Rhetoric of Higher Education*

Review Type: ☒ EXEMPT ☐ EXPEDITED ☐ FULL IRB

Approved Project Period: Start Date: 07/24/2013 Expiration Date: 07/23/2014

Your protocol has been approved by the IRB. Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. If you wish to continue the project past the approved project period (see above), you must submit a request, using the form *Continuing Review for IRB Approved Projects*, prior to the expiration date. This form is available from the IRB Coordinator or on the Research Compliance website (<http://vpred.uark.edu/210.php>). As a courtesy, you will be sent a reminder two months in advance of that date. However, failure to receive a reminder does not negate your obligation to make the request in sufficient time for review and approval. Federal regulations prohibit retroactive approval of continuation. Failure to receive approval to continue the project prior to the expiration date will result in Termination of the protocol approval. The IRB Coordinator can give you guidance on submission times.

This protocol has been approved for 15 participants. If you wish to make *any* modifications in the approved protocol, including enrolling more than this number, you must seek approval *prior* to implementing those changes. All modifications should be requested in writing (email is acceptable) and must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact me at 210 Administration Building, 5-2208, or irb@uark.edu.

210 Administration Building • 1 University of Arkansas • Fayetteville, AR 72701
Voice (479) 575-2208 • Fax (479) 575-3846 • Email irb@uark.edu

The University of Arkansas is an equal opportunity/affirmative action institution.

Appendix E: Institutional Review Board Project Continuation Approval Letter



Office of Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board

July 7, 2014

MEMORANDUM

TO: Paige Hermansen
Elías Domínguez Barajas

FROM: Ro Windwalker
IRB Coordinator

RE: PROJECT CONTINUATION

IRB Protocol #: 13-06-739

Protocol Title: *Selling College: Student Recruitment, Student Expectations, and the Rhetoric of Higher Education*

Review Type: ☒ EXEMPT ☐ EXPEDITED ☐ FULL IRB

Previous Approval Period: Start Date: 07/24/2013 Expiration Date: 07/23/2014

New Expiration Date: 07/23/2015

Your request to extend the referenced protocol has been approved by the IRB. If at the end of this period you wish to continue the project, you must submit a request using the form *Continuing Review for IRB Approved Projects*, prior to the expiration date. Failure to obtain approval for a continuation on or prior to this new expiration date will result in termination of the protocol and you will be required to submit a new protocol to the IRB before continuing the project. Data collected past the protocol expiration date may need to be eliminated from the dataset should you wish to publish. Only data collected under a currently approved protocol can be certified by the IRB for any purpose.

This protocol has been approved for 15 total participants. If you wish to make *any* modifications in the approved protocol, including enrolling more than this number, you must seek approval *prior to* implementing those changes. All modifications should be requested in writing (email is acceptable) and must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact me at 210 Administration Building, 5-2208, or irb@uark.edu.

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